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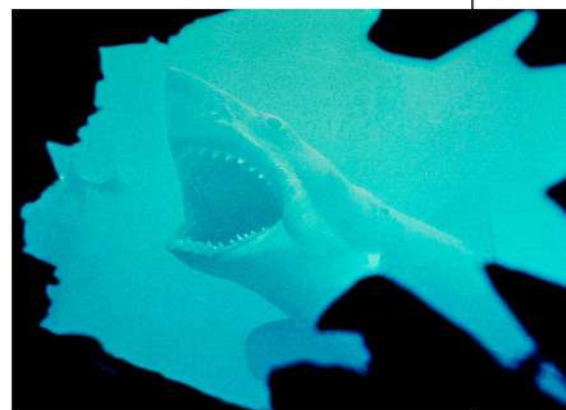
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WHEN I WAS but knee-high to a bow-legged woman — about seven or eight years old — I saw *Jaws* for the first time. And I was *not* okay. In fact, for a while I refused to go into any swimming pool, convinced that a great white shark might somehow enter through the water filter system and wreak havoc on my thrashing legs. This was unlikely: I lived in Gerrards Cross. But such was the fiendish relentlessness of the shark, at least the shark in Steven Spielberg's movie, that it seemed plausible. I was safe from most of the far-fetched villains I'd seen on screen. But this one was different. Real. Unseen. Out there, somewhere, cruising for food.

Millions upon millions of people have their own *Jaws* story. It put some in therapy. It inspired others to get into filmmaking themselves. And for any fan of cinema, it remains the North Star of thrillers. The tension is thick as an anchor rope, the dialogue salty as brine, the bench of iconic characters so deep that there is a social-media account dedicated to Amity's dickish mayor (@MayorLVaughn; and yes, he's still unrepentant). For our 50th anniversary special, then, we decided to enlist a crew for our very own Orca-voyage — asking famous fans of the movie to give us a hand celebrating its many genius elements. Head to page 48 for Leigh Whannell on the direction, Hans Zimmer on the score, Simon Pegg on the hero, Robert Shaw's son Ian on his dad, and lots, lots more.

Other goodies in this issue feel fittingly *Jaws*-adjacent. We speak to Scarlett



Johansson as she goes full Quint, taking on the role of a dinosaur-hunter for *Jurassic World Rebirth*. We delve into the future of Payakan, another behemoth water-beast, for *Avatar: Fire And Ash*. And we take a trip to *The Ballad Of Wallis Island*, a place which, unlike Amity Island, has no shark problem at all, at least that we know of.

Enjoy the issue.



Nick
NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
[@nickdesemlyen](https://twitter.com/nickdesemlyen)

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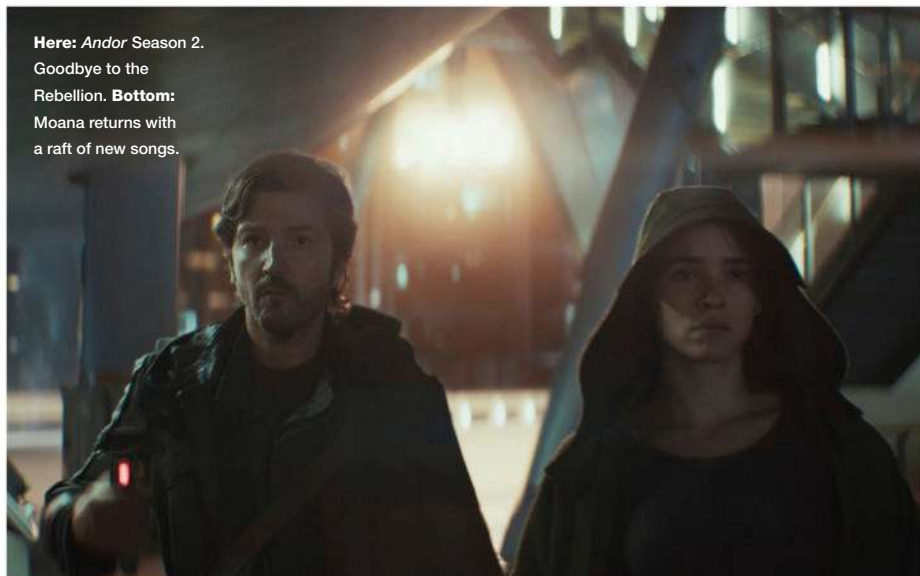
This month's exclusive cover by Paul Shipper
To celebrate *Jaws*' 50th anniversary, we enlisted award-winning artist Paul to create jaw-dropping art for not only our newsstand cover, but our subscriber-only cover too. See more of his work at paulshipperstudio.com

TURN TO PAGE 8 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION

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final cut

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DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH



RACHELL SMITH PHOTOGRAPHED ALEXANDER SKARSGÅRD

"Photographing Alexander was an absolute honour. His trust in the process allowed us to create something unexpected — mixing surrealism with portraiture. I love using light to find those unplanned moments, and his openness made the experience exciting and creatively fulfilling."



JAMES DYER PRESENTED A GNOME TO BRIAN TYREE HENRY

"Brian outed himself as a 'gnome enthusiast' in our recent Pint Of Milk interview, so I took it upon myself to expand his collection with this rather special *Scarface*-themed lawn guardian. He was immediately dubbed 'Steve'. ('Al Pacignome' was right there!)"



CHRIS HEWITT HOSTED AN EMPIRE VIP SCREENING OF THE ELECTRIC STATE

"Look at the absolute Electric State of me here, standing slap-bang in the middle of the Russo Brothers ahead of our exclusive *Empire* VIP Club screening in March. I think this makes me officially the third Russo Brother. Call me Chip. Chip Russo."



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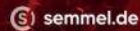
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EMPIRE COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH



RAIDERS OF THE LOST EMPIRE

Congratulations on a great magazine. The *Empire* standard has never dropped and your current team of writers is especially brilliant. I finally got round to taking my issues out of the loft to properly catalogue and re-pack them. In terms of boxes, it wasn't quite the final act of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, but it felt like it by the time I'd finished! I really just felt compelled by my journey back in time to say that you've been a big influence on this 58-year-old's life — you've kept my love for and connection to the silver screen alive.

RICHARD CHAMBERS, VIA EMAIL

As they say in Raiders, it's not the years — it's the mileage. Thanks for your kind words, Richard — have a Picturehouse membership on us, for many more years spent with the silver screen to come.

Picturehouse

Empire's star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.



ON THE F1 TRAILER:

Brad could not squint any more than this. This is peak Brad Squint.

TOM PARKER

A SIGHT FOR SPORE EYES

I believe Matt Kamen's review of the game *Avowed* [Reviews, issue #439], containing the line, "The amount of freedom to mould your mushroom-infused hero however you will, be it into a fungi or a real piece of shiitake," may be worthy of a Pulitzer.

CAMERON GILROY, VIA EMAIL

We're not sure if the Pulitzer shortlist has mushroom for the likes of Empire, but Matt Kamen will always be a champion to us.



ON THE BULLET TRAIN EXPLOSION TRAILER:

More films need titles like this — the whole film in three words. Genius.

@SOAPYPITTS1977.BSKY.SOCIAL

ACCEPTABLE IN THE '80S

I loved your 'The movies of 1985' article ['The Ranking', issue #437]. What a year. In my case, at the beginning of 1985, I also saw [1984's] *Ghostbusters* and *Gremlins* on the big screen. My first movies in the cinema ever. Those, and *Back To The Future*. Yes, I am proud!

DANNY VAN DOOSSELAERE, DUFFEL, BELGIUM

As long as your cinematic education didn't start with Police Academy 2: Their First Assignment...

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
AFTER THE ALTO KNIGHTS AND MICKEY 17, WHO ELSE WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE STAR WITH THEMSELVES?



George Clone-y.
@JIMILINO.BSKY.SOCIAL

Keanu Reeves fighting his clone in 'Battle Of The Wicks'.
@WINDYERNECKIN.BSKY.SOCIAL

Octavia Spencer. Imagine the raised eyebrows of scepticism.
@BURNTCOPPER.BSKY.SOCIAL

Stanley Tucci! I want a bizarre road-trip

comedy where the dad from *Easy A* and his character from the *Transformers* movies are twins.
@DREWTOYNBEE.BSKY.SOCIAL

Cage AND Travolta facing off against their opposing evil face-swapped clones in the long-belated, even more logically challenged, inversely moniker sequel '2 Face/Off'.
@E3JTP.BSKY.SOCIAL

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR BLUESKY ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE.BSKY.SOCIAL

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

STEVEN SPIELBERG'S JAWS ARCHIVE JUNE 2014

Empire has long celebrated *Jaws* — the massive shark previously appeared on our cover in 2008 and 2018 — but we last took a truly deep dive as part of our mammoth 300th issue celebration, which saw Steven Spielberg graciously unearth some of his most prized treasures from the film (while posing in front of a replica shark at Universal Studios in Los Angeles).

Among the artefacts

dusted off included Spielberg's original shooting script (with the dialogue, "You got to get a bigger boat!" scribbled in handwriting); the one-eyed prosthetic of Ben Gardner's head; and a framed and mounted tooth from the great Bruce after my lawyer, Bruce Ramer," Spielberg said. "I would never have named the shark after my attorney if my attorney didn't have a great sense of humour."



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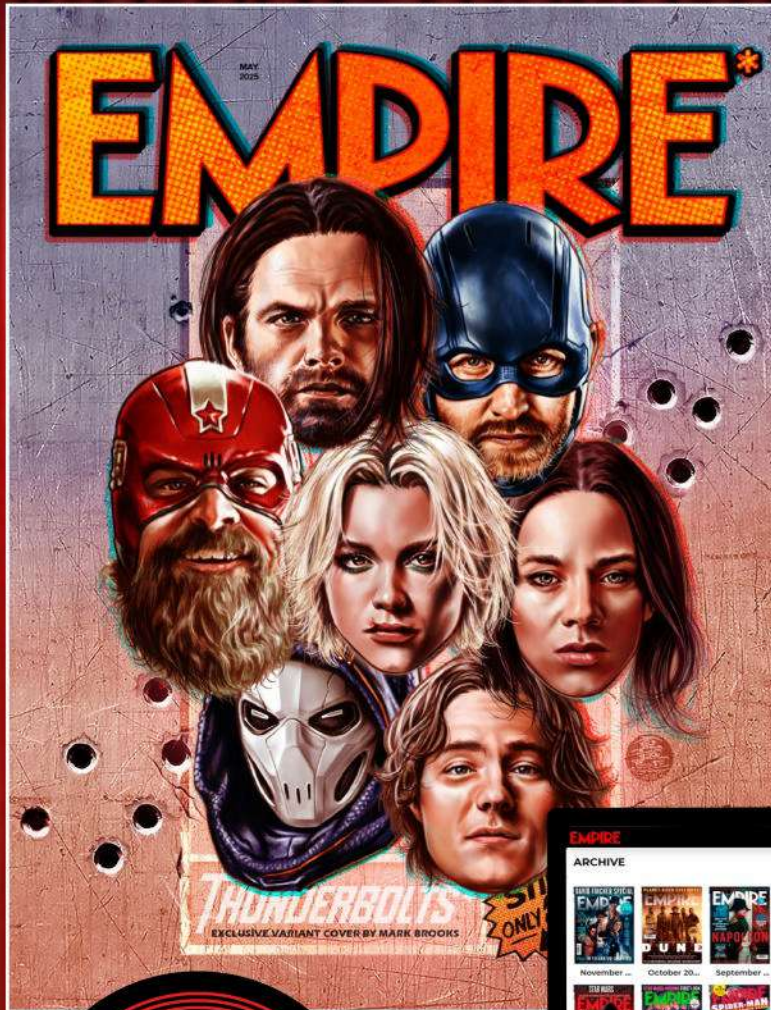
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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

JUNE 2025 | EDITED BY BETH WEBB

The villain who goes off-grid

THE DIRECTOR OF *TRON: ARES* ON CRAFTING A DIGITAL ROGUE

WORDS ALEX GODFREY

"YOU GO TO his compound," remembers director Joachim Rønning of his first meeting with *Tron: Ares* star Jared Leto. "It used to be an old Air Force base and it's fascinating, because it basically still looks like one, and it's in the middle of Hollywood."

Embedded deep in the hills overlooking Los Angeles, surrounded by dense woodland, Leto's home was an air-traffic control station before being reconfigured as an Air Force operation in 1947 as the Cold War kicked in. Leto bought it in 2015, and so here Rønning went to discuss a very contemporary combatant: the mysterious title character of his sci-fi threequel. Who is, notably, named after the Greek God of War. And there in Leto's old military digs, the actor and director discussed the future.

The latest instalment in the growing franchise — which takes in the 1982 original, and

2010's *Tron: Legacy* — had been in development for years, with Leto involved since 2017.

Rønning was brought on board in 2023, and the actor had many thoughts. "He wanted this character to hold up a mirror for the audience," says Rønning. "We talked a lot about him almost being an infant, discovering the world for the first time, and how we wanted the audience to see the world through his eyes. The little things that we take for granted, or don't see anymore. That was important. And then a bigger theme for the film is what it takes — what it means — to be human. Especially in this case, because he's a computer program. And not to be too clichéd, but I always thought about him a bit like Pinocchio. Ares wants to be a real boy."

Just like that little wooden scamp, Ares embarks on an epic journey. He is second in command to Evan Peters' corporate antagonist Julian Dillinger, and is the Master Control, in charge of the Grid — Kevin Flynn's (Jeff Bridges)

"digital frontier" — but something's eating away at him. "He's being ruled by Dillinger," says Rønning, "so he has to do what he tells him to do, and he starts questioning things as he becomes more self-aware."

As you can see from the image above, Ares also boasts a different Identity Disc than the ones we're used to. As in, it's not particularly disc-like. We're getting triangular. Identity Discs contain the user's data, and include everything there is to know about them, recording everything they experience (as well as just looking cool). Ares' one, says Rønning, carefully, "has other... abilities than what we're used to seeing". As we know from the previous *Tron* outings, Identity Discs also serve as weapons — lethal Frisbees, basically — and with Ares' one having sharp edges, presumably it can do more harm, more immediately.

"You're not wrong," admits Rønning. "It's definitely a weapon, yeah. And it's just a superior





Above: Jared Leto as Ares, a sentient AI sent into the real world. **Left:** *Tron: Ares* director Joachim Rønning; Jeff Bridges in the 1982 film.

disc. When you're a part of a franchise, you want to evolve the design, although I'm sure people are gonna freak out that it's not round: 'Oh no!' But we have round discs as well," he says, pre-empting a circular backlash. "Take it easy."

This shape isn't just a one-off aesthetic choice, though. "Darren Gilford, our production designer, and I wanted to create something unique for the Dillinger Grid," explains Rønning of this untapped part of the *Tron* world. "Because this is new — we haven't been on this grid before. So that disc is part of the bigger picture of how that grid is designed."

That approach spirals off in many directions. In what might be a metaphor for this film across the board, smoother edges are out. As Rønning previously told *Empire*, this one is

grittier, not least signalled by the score, for which the lush orchestral tones provided by Daft Punk for *Tron: Legacy* have made way for Nine Inch Nails' industrial din. And Ares' suit follows, erm, suit. "The lines, which are such a *Tron* trademark, they... well I think we probably spent a year designing the suit, with Darren Gilford and Wētā. I'm not gonna even tell you the money that was spent building these suits," he laughs. "But it was because it was so important to me that it all felt like the '82 *Tron*, but at the same time something new. We wanted to take *Tron* to the next level. And it all ties in with the design of the Dillinger grid, together with the Identity Disc. You can see that the [suit's] lines are a little more jagged. The design is a little harder. Unfriendlier."

Ares is not here to make friends. Let war commence.

TRON: ARES IS IN CINEMAS FROM 10 OCTOBER



Making a bigger splash

HOW AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH IS TAKING TULKUN TO THE NEXT LEVEL

WORDS **IAN FREER**

IT'S OFTEN HARD to predict a breakout star, a supporting character who wins hearts and launches memes in equal measure. But when Payakan, that cheeky young orca-like tulkun, just about stole *The Way Of Water* from under the blue noses of the Na'vi, the reason seemed pretty clear. "I think the idea of having a giant-sized whale as a puppy dog or a best friend goes



a long way," says Richard Baneham, VFX supervisor and executive producer on *Fire And Ash*. "He's turned out to be one of the most popular characters."

The subject of fan-made artwork, parody songs (with lyrics such as "Out of all the space whales/You know you're the mastermind") and tattoos, Payakan is the Boba Fett of the *Avatar* universe: minimum screen time but maximum impact. "The reaction emboldened us to go forward and play Payakan at the very highest level," Baneham says of how the tulkun is being levelled up for the upcoming *Avatar: Fire And Ash*. "Not that we wouldn't have [anyway], but you realise he really needs to be a player and an emotional actor."



THE PIPELINE



EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

SINGLE WHITE FEMALE REMAKE

Barbet Schroeder's 1992 psychosexual thriller is getting a remake — and **Taylor Russell** and Jenna Ortega are being lined up to lead it. The original film saw Bridget Fonda's Allie Jones stuck in a nightmare after renting a room to Jennifer Jason Leigh's stiletto-wielding tenant Hedy.



CUJO

Stephen King's classic killer-canine thriller, last adapted by Lewis Teague back in 1983, is getting the remake treatment at Netflix.

And, according to the Hollywood trades, **Darren Aronofsky** — famed for his psychologically intense narratives — is preparing to wrangle the bat-bitten St. Bernard this time out.



PLACE TO BE

The Last Showgirl's comeback queen **Pamela Anderson** has landed a role in Kornél Mundruczó's (*Pieces Of A Woman*) latest.

Currently shooting in Sydney, the movie, described as "a poignant drama", will see Anderson play Ellen Burstyn's daughter — and share the screen with Taika Waititi.





Clockwise from left: Concept art of Lo'ak and Payakan surfing by Dylan Cole; Richard Baneham and James Cameron on the *Fire And Ash* set; Payakan breaches in a spectacular moment from *The Way Of Water*.

One big change-up this time around is that Payakan has a new pal, a female tulkun named Ta'nok (this is not a romantic relationship; they didn't meet on the apps or Sea-Harmony). Baneham reveals that Ta'nok is "a member of Payakan's tribe, another outcast. There's a really great dynamic between them." But what does this mean for Payakan's close friendship with Sully offspring Lo'ak (Britain Dalton)?

"They've become forever bonded, and I think that plays out nicely in this one," says Baneham. "As Payakan's story evolves, it affects Lo'ak's behaviour. He fundamentally believes it is his place to be with Payakan."

James Cameron recently told *Empire* that, via use of AI, humans might be able to talk to

whales within the next five years ("Like, actually communicate. Not just hold up a fish and jump through a hoop, but [say], 'What's on your mind? What are you thinking?'"). On set, for scenes where Lo'ak and Payakan speak to each other, actor Kevin Dorman provided the voice of Payakan for Britain Dalton to react and respond to. "Kevin is our go-to player for a multitude of characters," says Baneham. "His voice is modified but the cadence and intonation really help with the connection. It certainly evoked the right spirit in the scenes at the time."

As a huge sea creature, Payakan is limited in his ability to articulate, so both in the design — witness his iconic silhouette, bifurcating (split in two) tail and colourful membrane — and the animation, Baneham's VFX team have to get creative to have him be expressive. "You're looking for the idiosyncrasies that support the attitude or the dialogue or the emotion of the moment," he says. "The acting choice has to be clear. I think that's working pretty well."

Fire And Ash also introduces Matriarch and

Patriarch, leaders of the tulkun clan who provide a deeper insight into their culture. "Matriarch is a very interesting character," says Baneham. "She's in full regalia. We're using rings and tattoos as a way to suggest a relationship beyond what we're seeing. You really understand there's a history between the Metkayina [the ocean Na'vi] and the tulkun."

And there will be a grand council meeting featuring the tulkun, that Baneham says "should be pretty impressive on screen". To create the tulkun way of life depicted in *Fire And Ash*, the filmmakers have extrapolated from both whale and human behaviour. "We're aiming for the idea of ceremony, the idea of rite of passage for these characters to grow and have a place in society. We see that play out just in their behaviour in the water." For fans of Payakan (and frankly, who isn't?), the world of everybody's favourite talking space whale is about to get a whole lot richer.

AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 DECEMBER

THE NATURAL ORDER

For his *Mufasa* follow-up, auteur **Barry Jenkins** is set to join forces with Glen Powell on a new sci-fi movie based on an as-yet-unpublished Matt Aldrich novel. Plot specifics are firmly under wraps, though reports suggest the film will revolve around the pursuit of immortality.

UNTITLED M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN MOVIE

Phoebe Dynevor and Jake Gyllenhaal are set to collide in a supernatural romantic thriller dreamed up in a collaboration between M. Night Shyamalan and Nicholas Sparks. Shyamalan wrote the screenplay; Sparks is independently working on a novel based on the same story.

THE WHISPER MAN

Robert De Niro, Michelle Monaghan, and Adam Scott will spearhead James Ashcroft's Netflix adaptation of Alex North's crime novel. The plot focuses on a widowed crime-writer who turns to his estranged former police-detective father for help when his eight-year-old son is abducted.

KAROSHI

The latest offering from stunt outfit 87Eleven (*John Wick*) will star **Cynthia Erivo**, *Past Lives*' Teo Yoo, and 1883 breakout Isabel May. From writer-director Takashi Doscher, the inbound actioner — tantalisingly described as "a corporate thriller with a samurai twist" — will begin filming in June.

THE LAST RESORT

Star Wars alumni Daisy Ridley and **Alden Ehrenreich** will play a star-crossed hotel executive and charter pilot in romcom legends Donald Petrie (*Miss Congeniality*) and Karen McCullah's (*10 Things I Hate About You*) new destination romance. The film, set in the Philippines, shoots this month.





Two greats brave the elements

GILLIAN ANDERSON AND JASON ISAACS GO BACK TO
BASICS IN THE SALT PATH WORDS LEILA LATIF

FOR TWO ACTORS whose careers both began in the late '80s, it's amazing that Gillian Anderson and Jason Isaacs have never shared the screen before. But finally their stars have aligned for British drama *The Salt Path*, based on Raynor Winn's poignant memoir. They play real-life married couple Raynor (Anderson) and Moth (Isaacs), who, in the face of financial destitution and a terminal diagnosis for Moth, set out to walk the South West Coast Path with their remaining belongings packed into rucksacks. We spoke to the pair together about their stripped-back collaboration.

How did preparing for playing Moth and Raynor feel different from previous roles?

Jason Isaacs: Gillian and I have played very famous people, like Margaret Thatcher and Cary Grant, but in this instance, people don't know who they are. They have quite unusual accents, plus Moth has a neurological condition that affects his speech. You do all the planning, and then someone says, "Action!" and you go, "Fuck

it," and hope some of it's absorbed.

Gillian Anderson: It's a true honour to play all flavours of humanity. It's true, the majority of the characters I have played are very privileged, but I welcome the opportunity for range.

Isaacs: And we love stories. We're storytellers and I don't like telling the same story over and over again. I shot this before *The White Lotus* and whatever Gill's been doing. Really good stories are just about people in extraordinary situations.

Your characters are forced into a tough situation without financial stability or a roof over their heads. Have you ever found yourself in a state of precariousness?

Anderson: Oh gosh, yes. I was sleeping on somebody's couch and living off my final unemployment cheque when I got *The X-Files*. I've not been in Ray and Moth's circumstances, but I've certainly woken up with heart palpitations, worrying if this was about to all go away.



Top to bottom: Raynor (Gillian Anderson) and Moth (Jason Isaacs); The actors with their real-life counterparts; Solace in nature.



THE PLATFORM

"Horror can reflect the anxieties of the time and still be a hoot"



LEILA LATIF ON WHY HER FAVOURITE GENRE SHOULD BE MADE FUN AGAIN

WHEN TIMES GET tough, horror is my ultimate comfort food. Not dour, heavy-handed metaphors for intergenerational trauma that are so often mistakenly labelled as 'elevated horror'. I'm talking balls-to-the-wall, unhinged, blood-splattered excess: *Evil Dead*, *Braindead*, *Dawn Of The Dead*. The deader the better. And when few things are as disturbing as the news headlines, great solace can be taken in the fact that, as bad as things get, at least no-one has read aloud from the *Necronomicon*.

But in the wake of stone-cold classics like *The Babadook*, *Get Out* and *Hereditary*, the genre has striven for the fashionable label of 'elevation'. We've been inundated with repetitive narratives about the pressures of parenthood and a slew of hackneyed arthouse fare that seems too embarrassed to have any fun. So many of these films are drab and grey, throwing in a few token, tepid scares and suggesting that no-one had ever noticed the patriarchy before.

There have, thankfully, been signs of the tide turning. The *Terrifier* franchise — which has a proven record of making cinemagoers vomit — is going from strength to strength, with a fourth entry currently being written. Then there's Hugh Grant chewing the scenery in *Heretic*, and Oz Perkins' delightful double punch of satanic chiller *Longlegs*

and gorefest *The Monkey* (pictured above). In 2025, fun horror is truly on. The return of *Final Destination* promises creative killings aplenty. Meanwhile, body-horror festival darlings *Together* (out in August in the US) and *The Ugly Stepsister* (in UK cinemas from 25 April) tease a bloody good time.

None of this is to say that we will fully be returning to the pre-*Babadook* status quo. There's plenty from that time that should be rightfully disregarded, like women with sexual agency being gleefully tortured on screen, or where the sole Black character dies first. But I'm hopeful that the genre is moving away from the idea that intelligence is conflated with subtlety. After all, *Get Out* was a damning indictment of post-Obama-era race relations, but Daniel Kaluuya's Chris also stabbed someone through the skull with taxidermied deer's antlers.

Let's face it: looking around the world at the moment, the evils we are surrounded by aren't exactly understated, so why would those on screen be? Horror can reflect the anxieties of the time, of the other, of counterculture, bodily autonomy, and technology, and still be a hoot. And now we can embrace enjoying a little fun and catharsis in movies that strive to spin our nightmares into entertaining onscreen mayhem.

Isaacs: Those things were thrown into sharp relief. Sure, [Ray and Moth] lost all their assets and any sense of security, but then at the same time, they were suddenly told that Moth was going to die, and probably very soon. And so no material stuff seems important in those instances.

Jason, you appeared in a similarly knotty drama, *Mass*, in 2021. Why are you drawn to these kinds of films?

Isaacs: People thought *Mass* was about school shootings, but it's about the power of forgiveness. This film is an inspiring love story. I was having a conversation recently with someone wealthy, and they said, "My partner wouldn't be with me if I didn't have money." I was horrified! I think we all should aspire to what Ray and Moth have.

How has it felt to finally collaborate?

Anderson: We've known each other peripherally for a long time, [we've got] lots of mutual friends and colleagues. At various points I had reached out to see whether he was available for something I was involved in, but this is the first time we've worked together.

You both acted in Netflix's *Sex Education* but never shared scenes, right?

Isaacs: (To Anderson) I submitted [for], but didn't get the part [of], your husband in *Sex Education* that James Purefoy got.

Anderson: I didn't know that! I've been a huge fan for a long time.

Isaacs: I loved that after the series that made you so famous [The X-Files], you threw yourself into some fantastic films. Was [there one by] Terence Davies?

Anderson: *The House Of Mirth*?

Isaacs: Yes! You just put a bonnet on and showed that you can do anything. I was persuaded to be a fan because when you see someone do hundreds and hundreds of episodes of something, you wrongly assume that that's what they are, and I was thrilled to see [you] can do anything. Anyway, that's enough praise. It's sickening.

THE SALT PATH IS IN CINEMAS FROM 30 MAY

Steve Tanner/Black Bear, Imago



Take your seats

FOR ITS BIGGEST MOVIE YET, **AVENGERS: DOOMSDAY**, MARVEL DELIVERED THE MOST EPIC CASTING ANNOUNCEMENT OF ALL TIME. HERE'S HOW IT WENT DOWN

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

A COUPLE OF weeks before cameras started rolling in late March on *Avengers: Domsday*, *Empire* caught up with its directors, Joe and Anthony Russo. What, we wondered, was the state of preparedness? “*Avengers: Endgame* was shot six weeks after we did *Infinity War*, and we were really underprepared, but we had a really strong sense of the story,” said Joe Russo. “I’d say we’re probably in a similar position.” Anthony Russo smiled, and added, “We’re hurtling toward Doom.”

But when it came to the announcement of the start of production on the film, and confirmation of its cast, which took place during a live-stream event on Wednesday 26 March, “ambling toward Doom” might have been more apt. Because the announcement was stretched out longer than Reed Richards, as 27 cast-members were heralded across the course of five hours and 28 minutes. More than enough time to watch both *Infinity War* and *Endgame* (if you shave off the closing credits of the latter).

It all started with a close-up of a director’s chair on an empty soundstage. The name on the back? Chris Hemsworth, Thor himself. It was a neat callback to the announcement of the beginning of production on the very first

Avengers movie, back in 2011. And the expectation here was that the chairs would soon pile up; an indication of how the MCU has swelled in size since.

And that did happen, albeit at a pace generously described as glacial, with one new chair being unveiled roughly every 12 minutes or so. It was certainly a bold approach. But it was also a success. The video had, at the time of going to press, nearly 15 million views. And for nearly six hours, social media was ablaze with people talking about *Avengers: Domsday*, speculating on which name would crop up next, how long it would be before the camera moved again, and silly suggestions for additions to the cast. No, Trent Alexander-Arnold will not be joining *Avengers: Domsday*. No, Joan Crawford will not be returning as Mildred Pierce in *Avengers: Domsday*. Even the official account for the Empire State Building chimed in, claiming the iconic

edifice was signed up for a supporting role.

And when all was said and done, we were left with the names of the cast of the first Avengers movie since 2019. Some of those names were expected (Hemsworth, all of the new Fantastic Four, Anthony Mackie), some of which were less so (the return of Simu Liu as Shang-Chi, Tom Hiddleston as Loki, virtually the entire cast of *Thunderbolts*®), and some of which were out of leftfield (essentially, a small squad of actors from 20th Century Fox’s X-Men movies, including Patrick Stewart, Ian McKellen, Alan Cumming, Rebecca Romijn and Kelsey

Grammer; plus Channing Tatum, continuing to scratch that Gambit itch after *Deadpool & Wolverine*).

The inclusion of the X-Men — to whom the door was opened when Grammer cameoed at the end of *The Marvels* — might suggest that the film will flit back and forth between Sam Wilson as he puts his Avengers team together, and an Earth that is not the Earth of the MCU. Instead, it could be



Getty Images



Left, top to bottom: Robert Downey Jr. plus 2025's buzziest chairs; *The Avengers* announcement of 2011, on which this event riffed; *X-Men* nobility Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen will join the party. **Right, top to bottom:** Unleash the Beast! Kelsey Grammer, here in *The Marvels*, will return; Simu Liu's Shang-Chi; Letitia Wright suited up as *Black Panther*; Channing Tatum's *Gambit*. **Facing page:** The Russo Brothers.

home to the Fantastic Four, to that particular group of X-Men... and to Doctor Doom. Because the final chair actually had someone sitting in it: Robert Downey Jr., who will return to the MCU to play the film's titular threat, the megalomaniacal masked menace known as Victor Von Doom, aka Doctor Doom.

It's a fair bet that the 26 names that came before Downey Jr. will be pitted against him. It's also a very different *Avengers* line-up for a movie that promises to be a very different *Avengers* film, with no sign so far of the likes of Chris Pratt, Tom Holland, Brie Larson, Benedict Cumberbatch or Mark Ruffalo. "It will challenge audiences," Joe Russo told *Empire* in early March. "We feel like we get a better handle on this world every time we go back into it. This one is a punch in the nose. It's going to be really interesting to see how people respond." How many of those stars will be left standing at the end remains to be seen, as they hurtle toward Doom, and doom. And who else might join the resistance? After all, in answer to Downey Jr.'s social-media post after the reveal, saying, "That must be it... right?", the official Marvel Studios account archly replied, "There's always room for more." Reinforcements might be required.

AVENGERS: DOOMSDAY IS IN CINEMAS FROM 1 MAY 2026





The popcorn bucket explosion heats up

EMPIRE INVESTIGATES HOW THEMED SNACK CONTAINERS HAVE BECOME BIG BUSINESS FOR CINEMAS

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

"THERE WERE SOME panicked phone calls," says Rod Mason. "I looked at social media and thought: 'Oh my God...' But we embraced it. When you become a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*, you have to accept you're part of the zeitgeist."

Mason is Vice President of Business Development at Zinc Group, the merchandise company responsible for the sandworm-shaped *Dune 2* popcorn bucket that swept America and went mega-viral last year due to its uncanny resemblance to certain, erm, 'adult' products. ("I'm gonna lose my virginity to the *Dune* popcorn bucket," went the *SNL* skit.) "You don't

choose to go viral," Mason laughs. "It's uncontrollable. But that bucket was the catalyst for what's happening now."

What's happening now is that — in the wake of that unintentionally titillating container — wacky popcorn buckets have gone from occasional concession-stand novelty to *hugely* lucrative business over in the U.S. Every post-*Dune 2* blockbuster has had its own vessel, from *Deadpool & Wolverine* to *Alien: Romulus* to *Gladiator II*, with studios competing to create the most eye-catching. "Ryan Reynolds even reworked the *Deadpool* bucket to try to replicate the *Dune* bucket's virality," explains Mason. Sure enough, the eventual container was highly sex-toy-ish, featuring Wolverine's gaping mouth

("2024 [was] when the War of the Popcorn Buckets began," Reynolds wrote on X).

Last year alone, US cinema chain AMC earned around \$65 million from novelty popcorn buckets and other paraphernalia — a welcome new income stream after a tough half-decade following the Covid pandemic and the Hollywood strikes. "I think [the buckets] are helping bring people back to the movies," says Mason. "Content is always king, but a memento to go with it enhances the experience. Most people don't even put popcorn in them — they figure they're collectible. An investment." Indeed, AMC's Director of Food and Beverages, Rob Bennett, tells *Empire* he's seen "people queuing outside theatres at 9am to get buckets as

Top row, left to right: *Alien*; *Romulus*; *Deadpool & Wolverine*; *The Monkey*. Bottom row, left to right: *The Dune* bucket that went viral; *Beetlejuice*; *Beetlejuice*; *Gladiator II*.

soon as they're on sale". Mason adds: "One guy went into a cinema to buy 75 *Dune* buckets, purely to re-sell them. At one point they were selling online for \$800 each."

New York-based bucket collector P.F. (aka Reddit user 'HabichuelaConDulce') hasn't parted with quite that much for a single container — but he's getting there. "I paid about \$100 for the R2D2 *Rise Of Skywalker* bucket [from 2019]," he tells us. "It can get expensive. I need to cut down." P.F. began with an impulse purchase of a novelty bucket for *The Batman* (modelled on Robert Pattinson's character's helmet) in 2022, and "it grew from there". Now he has 66 containers and counting. "Sometimes, I won't even see the movie, I'll just get the bucket," he admits. "I even had someone DM me recently, saying, 'If you're interested in selling your collection, let me know...'"

The trend has become so significant that a movie's 'talent' will often oversee its bucket design. As well as Reynolds spearheading the *Deadpool* vessel, Tim Burton personally designed the container for *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* (shaped like a less provocative coiled sandworm), and Mason confirms that Tom Cruise was involved in 2023's *Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning* bucket: "We wanted to incorporate the movie's submarine [The *Sevastopol*], but Cruise and the producers said no, so we had to go back to the drawing board" (they eventually settled on featuring the film's rogue AI, 'The Entity'). Cruise has also had creative input into the accompanying bucket for *Mission 8*, although Mason is under a strict IMF embargo and unable to divulge any information on it.

He acknowledges we "may reach saturation" at some point — but for now, BucketMania shows no signs of fading. "Beyond blockbusters, we're producing [buckets] for smaller films now, like Neon's *The Monkey*," says Bennett. "There are two big anniversaries this year — *Jaws*' 50th and *Back To The Future*'s 40th — we'll also have vessels for those." Three years ago, AMC was the only US chain creating these items, but now "all our competitors make them", says Bennett. So don't be surprised if UK cinemas enter the fray eventually, too. "We're constantly innovating," Bennett adds. "We add moving parts or wheels to containers whenever we can. Augmented reality is being incorporated as well. It's more competitive than ever — and that's exciting." In the War of the Popcorn Buckets, a peace treaty is a long way off.

KEANU REEVES' MOST VIOLENT FRANCHISE YET?

WE DIVE INTO THE WORLD OF THE ACTOR'S BRUTAL CREATION, *BRZRKR*

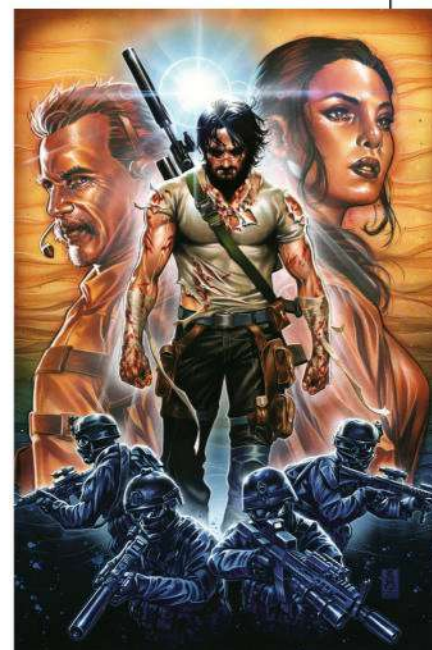
IN FRONT OF the camera, Keanu Reeves has defied the laws of gravity. Now he's about to break new ground behind it, with his first-ever writing credit, for Netflix's live-action feature adaptation of *BRZRKR*. The film — which will also star Reeves and recently gained a director in Justin Lin — is adapted from the hugely successful comic-book series that Reeves co-created. With an anime series also incoming, it's time to brush up on *BRZRKR*.

AN UNKILLABLE KILLER IS BORN

Berzerker, or 'B', is a half-man, half-God. "I had this image in my head of a guy fighting through the ages because of his father's compulsion to violence," said Reeves of the character. He brought the idea to a meeting with BOOM! Studios in 2017, which was developed into a 12-issue series with writer Matt Kindt and artist Ron Garney. In the story B, an agent of war, works for the US government, fighting their most brutal battles in exchange for answers about his tortured existence. BOOM! set up a Kickstarter fund for *BRZRKR Vol. 1* in September 2020, hoping for around \$400,000 in pre-orders. Instead it raised \$1.5 million. Since 2021, *BRZRKR* has accrued two more volumes, selling over 3.5 million copies, plus 2024 novel *The Book Of Elsewhere*, that takes place in an alternate universe to *BRZRKR*'s.

ENTERING A NEW DIMENSION

Just weeks after *BRZRKR Vol. 1* hit shelves in March 2021, Netflix announced it had scooped up the hyper-violent IP. A live-action movie and anime series adaptation of the comic books



KEANU REEVES MATT KINDT RON GARNEY BILL CRABTREE

BRZRKR
VOLUME THREE



Top to bottom: The comic-book franchise's first cover; Bloody hell, it's volume three.

were confirmed, with Reeves set to star in and produce both. The series, helmed by *Terminator Zero* creator Mattson Tomlin, went into production last autumn, and will expand on the *BRZRKR* universe by exploring different elements of the 80,000-year-spanning story.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

Lin joined the *BRZRKR* live-action movie in March. Reeves had been crucial in securing finance for Lin's indie feature *Last Days*, which premiered at this year's Sundance film festival. Now the pair will embark on a more brutal journey, with the film billed as an epic saga that will follow B's blood-soaked, centuries-long journey. A release date is yet to be confirmed, but Tomlin, who is also penning the screenplay, confirmed that the script was well underway last July. A new world of pain awaits. **BETH WEBB**



On A Role

RALPH FIENNES IS ODYSSEUS

THE ACTOR PLAYS THE MYTHICAL KING IN ITHACA-SET DRAMA *THE RETURN*

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

THE LOCATIONS

Fiennes' turn as Odysseus, based on the end of Homer's *The Odyssey*, is something that began years ago, when director Uberto Pasolini invited him on a trip. "There was a moment when he asked me if I'd like to direct it, and we went on location scouts together with that in mind." That trip was to Ithaca, the island kingdom to which Odysseus returns after his ten-year, well, odyssey following the Siege of Troy. Fiennes eventually passed on directing, but remained attached to the role, and when filming did begin in Corfu in 2023, that brought an authenticity to his performance. "It was lovely to be in a part of Greece, to feel that coastline and those rocks and that sea," he says. "That helps, in a way, being in the place where you think it happened, or close to." Another key sequence took Fiennes to Italy, and "an Etruscan burial site called Cerveteri. It's not Greek, but it could be. That was very atmospheric".



Top to bottom:
Girding his loins: Ralph Fiennes as Odysseus; Skinny dipping, Greek-style; Fiennes was already familiar with Homer's classic tome.

THE LOOK

When Fiennes finally took on the role, the conversations with costume designer Sergio Ballo could well have been shorter than usual. For Odysseus wears a loincloth (and sometimes not even that) and a cloak for much of the film's running time. "It was a functioning loin cloth," he says. "It went between your legs and tied at the front. I kept having to adjust it, because it's not something I wear every day. I quite like how it made me behave." Up top, "I grew my beard and had a wig, basically, to lengthen my hair. And I pushed for little cuts and marks on the face. And on the body, two scars."

THE PHYSICALITY

Fiennes was 60 when he started filming, not that you could tell by taking a look at him in *The Return*. Sporting rock-hard abs, he swims and climbs and fights his way through the movie with the vigour of a man half his age. "I had a wonderful trainer called Dan [Avasilcai], who started me off on a routine to get as lean as possible with regular workouts and a very, very, very strict diet," says Fiennes. You can measure the strictness of a diet from the number of verys used to describe it. "It was strict. 'May I have a glass of wine?' 'No.' 'Can I just have an extra slice of toast?' 'No.'" When the fighting comes — and it will come — Odysseus proves to be a dab hand with a bow and arrow. "We had a lot of archery practice," says Fiennes. "On how you breathe and how you pull back the arrow."

THE HISTORY

Already a fan of Homer (Greece, not Groening), Fiennes didn't necessarily look to the source material for inspiration. "It's nice to kickstart your imagination or remind yourself of certain things," he says. "But it doesn't matter how much I've read *The Odyssey*." Instead, to fill out his vision of Odysseus as a tired and grizzled soldier, he turned elsewhere. The actor had always been interested in military history and had detailed discussions with Uberto about the horrors of war. "The scene where I recount the story of the [Trojan] horse felt like an important scene," Fiennes explains. "I think the line, 'The city could not be taken; only destroyed,' was taken from an interview with a Vietnam veteran about one of the Vietnamese cities during the American-Vietnamese War." By grounding Odysseus' story in reality, Fiennes was able to bring him closer to home.

THE RETURN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 11 APRIL

THE ONE-TAKE WONDER THAT HIT HARD

ADOLESCENCE DIRECTOR PHILIP BARANTINI ON MAKING THE NETFLIX PHENOMENON

"WE WANTED TO spark a bit of a conversation," Philip Barantini tells *Empire*. He's certainly succeeded. More than a bit. *Adolescence*, his four-part Netflix series with each episode filmed as one approximately hour-long take, has become a global cultural phenomenon, inspiring discussion about not only its extraordinary technique, but also its urgent subject matter. The story, about a 13-year-old boy accused of murdering a female peer, has even inspired a Labour MP to propose that it be screened in Parliament and schools, an idea backed by the Prime Minister. "What it's done has just blown my mind," adds the director, speaking to us from the set of *Enola Holmes 3* a week after the show's launch. "Like, I'm in Malta at the moment with most of the same crew, and we're just all in shock."

Barantini's involvement in *Adolescence* goes back four years to when Plan B, Brad Pitt's production company, first approached him, along with creator/co-writer/star Stephen Graham, with the idea of making a series using the one-shot format of Barantini's restaurant-set film *Boiling Point*. "I remember being in a car with Stephen, and we were talking about a couple of incidents in the news where young boys had stabbed young girls," Barantini explains. "And it really upset us. Then we looked into the background of incel culture and so on, and we were like: 'Holy crap — this is dangerous stuff.' So we thought the series could start with



Top to bottom: Owen Cooper as Jamie Miller; Erin Doherty plays a child psychologist; Philip Barantini on set with Cooper, Ashley Walters and Stephen Graham.

the arrest of a boy for that kind of crime."

That boy ended up being played by preternaturally talented unknown Owen Cooper, now 15. "Actors train for years to do what Owen is doing instinctively," observes Barantini. "And that is listening, truly listening and responding naturally in the moment..." Barantini says Cooper even scared himself during his character Jamie's outbursts in the third episode, opposite Erin Doherty as a child psychologist. "At one point he just lost it, and he frightened himself, I think, and burst into tears," remembers the director. So they had a break, Barantini told Cooper how brilliant he was, and encouraged him to really go for it. "Something in him changed. Then he threw the chair at one point, and it broke the set."

Now that Cooper is a young star, the series has become a monster hit, and everyone involved has been inundated with praise, will there be a follow-up returning to the same characters? "Who knows?" says Barantini, looking a tad startled by the question. "I mean, you know, let's see." We'll let the seismic impact of *Adolescence* settle in first, perhaps. **BOYD HILTON**

ADOLESCENCE IS ON NETFLIX NOW

HOLLYWOOD TEES OFF

PREPARE FOR BIRDIES AND BUNKERS, VIA A TRIO OF INCOMING GOLF TALES



STICK

Comedy stalwart Owen Wilson takes to the range as a washed-up former pro who finds new hope in a dishevelled teen protégé. From *Ford V Ferrari* writer Jason Keller, the ten-part Apple TV+ series will swing for the heartstrings as Wilson swaps *Cars* for pars in his first TV leading role.



HAPPY GILMORE 2

Sand-heads rejoiced when the return of Adam Sandler's rage-stifling putting maverick was announced, nearly 30 years after his first feature outing. An early look at the sequel promise cameos, cursing and caddies aplenty. Time to find your happy place again.



UNTITLED TIGER WOODS BIOPIC

An Obama-produced feature on the teed-up titan is reportedly in development, with *King Richard*'s Reinaldo Marcus Green in talks to direct. Based on the book *The Tiger Slam: The Inside Story Of The Greatest Golf Ever Played*, the film will chart his rise from child prodigy to controversy-courting world champion. **BETH WEBB**



Scarlett Johansson meets her dino destiny

THE STAR REVEALS HER LONG JOURNEY TO JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH

WORDS **DAN JOLIN**

DINOSAUR HUNTERS DON'T usually fare well in the *Jurassic* movies. Both Bob Peck's Muldoon and Vincent D'Onofrio's Vic Hoskins were eviscerated by "clever girl" velociraptors in *Park* and *World* respectively, while Ted Levine's Ken Wheatley was gobbled up by the wily indoraptor in *Fallen Kingdom*. But *Jurassic World Rebirth's* Zora Bennett might just break the curse. After all, she's a whole new breed of dino-hunter.

"I like to think of her as an operator," says Scarlett Johansson. "She's ex-military, who works for independent contractors. She's hired to do extractions." And unlike the glory-seeking alpha-dudes who have gone before, Zora's not exactly thirsting for dino-blood — or rather, dino-DNA, required in this instalment's plot to create a life-saving drug. "She's kind of burnt out when we find her," Johansson explains to *Empire*. "So when this opportunity comes along, it's very hard to pass up, because it means a chance for her to

have a shot at another kind of life."

Despite the messy demises of Zora's predecessors, the former Black Widow did not need convincing to join this particular high-stakes hunt. "I've been a fan since the first film," she says. "Any time I would read in the trades they were doing another *Jurassic*, I'd forward it to my agent and say, 'Anything for me?'"

Eventually there was, in *Rebirth's* cool-headed specialist, who leads a crack team — including Mahershala Ali's fellow covert operator and Jonathan Bailey's paleontologist — to a remote island off the Pacific coast to seek out three of the most gargantuan species. After another gentle reminder to the producers that she'd love to go *Jurassic*, the actor found herself in a room with none other than chief dino-wrangler Steven Spielberg. "It was a very long, wonderful meeting that we had to begrudgingly leave because we both have families," she laughs. "He really confirmed my huge fandom for the franchise and the opportunity [this film provided] for newness."

Nonetheless, Johansson first had to confirm the role was right for her: "Whatever I do has to feel impactful, you know?" Fortunately Spielberg, producer Frank Marshall and writer David Koepp (who scripted the first two *Jurassic Park* films) were, she says, "open to discussing the part with me, about where I felt she could be coloured in and made even more authentic and complex". Koepp, especially, was "such a wonderful collaborator," she continues. "He'd answer questions or help reword things. I like to be able to have an open dialogue with the writer and try to make things even deeper. It was a dream to be able to do that."

The result is a character who Johansson describes as "a little bit sparkly" despite all the grim stuff she's seen in her life. "I've met with many members of the armed forces and worked with the USO [United Services Organizations], and the people I've met who are at the highest level of security clearance all really share a certain kind of sense of humour, a warmth. So I wanted Zora to have that."





Top to bottom:
Covert-ops expert
Zora Bennett
(Scarlett Johansson)
uncovertly observes
paleontologist
Dr. Henry Loomis
(Jonathan Bailey);
Zora in the zone;
Teresa Delgado
(Luna Blaise) faces
off (and what a face)
with the T-Rex.



She is, Johansson concludes, “an optimistic person. She’s assuming, ‘I’ll just assemble a great team like I normally do, and we’ll get in and get out. What could go wrong?’ But it does go wrong. Very, very wrong...” As we’d expect. If we’ve learned nothing else from this series, it’s that the hunter always becomes the hunted.

JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH IS IN CINEMAS FROM 2 JULY

Getty Images, Imago



THE BOYS ARE BACK

WITH A THIRD YOUNG GUNS FILM INCOMING, WE REVISIT THE FRONTIER FRANCHISE'S ORIGINS

1970 – '87: SADDLING UP

Living in the Southwestern United States during the '70s, screenwriter John Fusco developed an interest in notorious gunslinger William Bonney, aka Billy The Kid. Researching for five months in Santa Fe, Fusco zeroed in on the Kid's participation in the Lincoln County War, where he joined a deputised posse known as the Regulators. Director Christopher Cain committed to making the film just 16 pages into reading Fusco's screenplay, the script trimming the Regulators from 11 to a more movie-friendly six. Now they just needed to find their sharpshooters...

1988: RIDING HIGH

Having worked with him on *That Was Then... This Is Now*, Cain cast Emilio Estevez as Billy The Kid, then assembled a gang of '80s hot shots to play the rest of the Regulators: Kiefer Sutherland, Lou Diamond Phillips,

Charlie Sheen, Dermot Mulroney and Casey Siemaszko. Marketed as *The Brat Pack Goes West*, the film became a big hit (\$56 million) worldwide. Keep 'em peeled for Tom Cruise in a cameo as a moustachioed gunman.

1990: SECOND SHOT

Only Estevez, Sutherland

Above: Young guns Lou Diamond Phillips, Kiefer Sutherland, Emilio Estevez, Casey Siemaszko, Charlie Sheen and Dermot Mulroney in the first film. **Below:** “Ancient gun” Estevez will direct part three.

and Phillips returned for the Geoff Murphy-directed sequel, adding Christian Slater, Alan Ruck and William Petersen. Plagued by production problems — union issues, snowstorms, Phillips breaking his elbow — the film was still popular, perhaps its biggest cultural legacy being the Bon Jovi hit theme song ‘Blaze Of Glory’ — in the UK, the film was even called *Young Guns II: Blaze Of Glory*. The Jove also appears as a bandit escaping jail.

2025: BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

Yeehaw! The Young Guns ride again! Eschewing the idea of populating the cast with today's youthful stars — Timothée Chalamet IS Billy The Kid — director and star Estevez is reuniting with his veteran partners Lou Diamond Phillips and Christian Slater as well as co-writing with Fusco. “I’ve heard all the jokes,” quipped Estevez, now 62, at an announcement event in Santa Fe. “Old Guns. Ancient Guns. You can hold on to those.” Perhaps Estevez is planning an elegiac, *Unforgiven*-y feel. Or given, in part II, Phillips’ Chavez was fatally wounded while an end titlecard reveals Slater’s Arkansas Dave was beheaded, maybe there will be a supernatural vibe. ‘Dead Or Alive’, indeed. **IAN FREER**



A large, blue, furry alien character (Stitch) is shown from the waist up, holding a black garden hose with a spray nozzle. He has a wide, toothy grin and is looking towards the right. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with colorful flowers and foliage.

An alien sensation sweeps the globe

LILO & STITCH DIRECTOR DEAN FLEISCHER CAMP ON WHY WE CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF ITS KNEE-HIGH AGENT OF CHAOS

WORDS **HARRY STAINER**

"WE ALL RELATE less to the princess and more to the tiny whirlwind-of-disaster goblin that Stitch is," Dean Fleischer Camp, director of the upcoming live-action *Lilo & Stitch* remake, is a longstanding fan of the stowaway alien star of the 2002 original. And he's far from alone. The latest trailer for the new film — which again sees Stitch crash-land in Hawaii and form a found family with two orphaned sisters — hit 158 million views on social media in 24 hours, which are big numbers for a live-action-remake preview. Then there's the social-media frenzy sparked by the character's return, from fans creating 'Stitchcore' videos — montages of the lively critter's craziest moments — to documenting "vintage" merchandise from the animated film on TikTok. "People never forget how much they love Stitch," says the director.

Fleischer Camp, whose 2021 stop-motion charmer *Marcel The Shell With Shoes On* scored an Oscar nomination, wanted to preserve the relatable chaos of his fuzzy protagonist but with

some recalibration for a new era. "Stitch is kind of a dick for the first half of the [animated] movie," he laughs, referring to Stitch's frantic mission to escape the fellow aliens hunting him down on Earth. "If you re-watch the original, he is literally just using Lilo as a human meat-shield for the first half."

So they decided to scale back the truck-hurling, unhinged mayhem of the character and instead explore the reasons behind his unruly actions. "It was a lesson we learned very quickly, that you can't just have Stitch go [and] fart in someone's punch bowl because he wants to be rude," the director jokes. This time, he's more like "a toddler putting something in their mouth" who doesn't know any other way to

behave. "He's leading with curiosity, and all he knows is destruction."

It was crucial, however, to retain the heart of the film's predecessor, another product of the oddball coupling of the toothy companion and lonely little girl (here played by Maia Kealoha) who is at risk of being separated from her big sister. "The drama at its core is very terrestrial," Fleischer Camp says. To help perfect the pairing of a human actor and CG character on screen, a Stitch puppet was used for Kealoha to interact with. Only, her bond with her bug-eyed prop went deeper than they anticipated. "Even on days when we weren't shooting them in the same scene together, she would insist on giving him a kiss goodnight," the director remembers. As disaster goblins go, we just can't get enough of this one.

LILO & STITCH IS IN CINEMAS FROM 23 MAY

Main: Stitch strikes again.
Right: Pool party: The beloved alien with Lilo (Maia Kealoha).



HOW REDDIT BECAME HORROR'S FUTURE

THE SOCIAL-MEDIA PLATFORM IS NOW A GO-TO SOURCE FOR ALL THINGS SCARY

STEPHEN KING CAN take a holiday; on-screen horror has found a new source for chills and thrills, and it doesn't come in hardback. Instead, Hollywood is plumbing the depths of Reddit — the forum-style platform fuelled by user votes — for short stories and scary premises to spin into shows and movies.

The most prolific adaptation to date hit headlines in March, when Sydney Sweeney signed on to produce and star in a twisted thriller plucked from a short-story subreddit (a community within the platform dedicated to a specific topic). 'I Pretended To Be A Missing Girl' was written by Joe Cote, a Massachusetts high-school teacher who came up with the story in his kitchen during Covid. The 7,300-word post, which went viral, follows a desperate drifter (Sweeney) who assumes the identity of missing girl Mikayla Murray in the hope of robbing her family. Once on the inside, she finds



Top to bottom: Sydney Sweeney will star in a new movie based on Reddit story 'I Pretended To Be A Missing Girl'; An episode of Screambox's *Tales From The Void*.

that all is terrifyingly not as it seems. The actor is putting out the film via her production company Fifty-Fifty films, with *Forrest Gump* screenwriter Eric Roth reportedly penning the script.

The attachment of such big names could lead to a flurry of studios following suit. The groundwork for the trend was laid back in 2020, when Netflix snapped up the rights to 'My Wife And I Bought A Ranch', another horror short posted on the subreddit r/nosleep, in a seven-figure deal. The six-post story about a married couple who find unwanted neighbours after moving to the mountains in Idaho was scooped up by the streamer, with Shawn Levy's production company on board, although the movie is still currently in development.

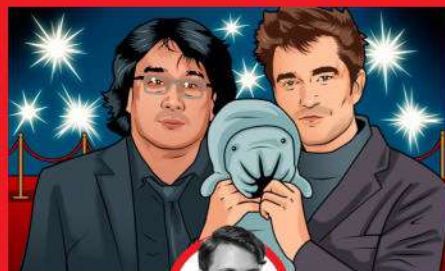
Having accrued something of a cult following, r/nosleep has also inspired an anthology series, *Tales From The Void*, which debuted on horror-streaming service Screambox in 2024. Each episode is taken from the subreddit's buzziest entries, like 'The Black Square', about, well, a black square causing chaos in the neighbourhood it mysteriously appears in. Then there's 'Betsy The Doll', about a broken family and a childhood toy. And with 18 million followers of the subreddit and posts going up every few hours, there is seemingly no end to the source material, thanks to regular folk with twisted imaginations. The future of horror is here, as long as you abide by the community guidelines. **BETH WEBB**

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM EMPIRE



BILL McCONKEY



BEN TRAVIS IS THINKING ABOUT... MICKEY 17'S MASCOT

The real star of the *Mickey 17* press tour? The 'Creper' plush, clutched by Bong Joon Ho, Robert Pattinson, Mark Ruffalo and more in interviews and on red carpets. I'm desperate to get my hands on one. Please? Director Bong?



CHRIS LUPTON IS THINKING ABOUT... RAQUEL WELCH'S WIG LINE

I love that the late screen legend has a side-hustle — The Raquel Welch Wig Collection. My favourites are the 'Play It Straight' and the 'Savoir Faire Couture Remy'. I hope to honour her legacy by wearing one at my next red-carpet event.



JORDAN KING IS THINKING ABOUT... ODYSSEUS' HELMET

We may have got our first look at Matt Damon as Odysseus in Christopher Nolan's upcoming epic. And yes, he does look suitably heroic. But I've since learned what Odysseus' helmet should actually look like, and now I fear we've been robbed. Seriously, Google "Boar's Tusk Helmet"...



The world of Wes gains an off-kilter comic

MICHAEL CERA TURNS NORWEGIAN FOR THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME, WES ANDERSON'S LATEST OUTING WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

IT'S ALMOST WEIRD that *The Phoenix Scheme* is Michael Cera's first film with Wes Anderson. With his deadpan delivery, knowing awkwardness and old-soul vibe, Cera just seems so obviously Wes Anderson-y. He's been a fan of Anderson for decades — "I saw *The Royal Tenenbaums* in the theatre... and watched *Rushmore* on a loop," he says — but while he came close to appearing in *Asteroid City*, before "the [shooting] dates of the movie got pushed to my son's delivery date", it's only now he's finally working with the symmetry-loving filmmaker. The wait was worth it, thankfully, because Cera's been given a role that is about as quintessentially Anderson as it gets.

The Phoenix Scheme centres on Zsa-Zsa Korda (Benicio Del Toro), an

extraordinarily rich businessman whose schemes have given him influence across the world and made him an enemy of various governments (*Empire's* suggestion that this might be Anderson commenting on current events is politely dismissed by Cera as "a bit of a stretch").

Cera plays Björn, a constantly bewildered, Norwegian, bug-obsessed tutor, who looks

kind of like a young Barton Fink and sounds like the Swedish Chef after elocution lessons. Björn is hired to educate Korda's sons, but winds up travelling the world with him and his estranged daughter, trainee nun Liesl (Mia Threapleton), as they attempt to save a troubled deal and repair their broken relationship. Björn would also like

a relationship of his own with Liesl.



Above: Same barber? Michael Cera as Björn and Benicio Del Toro as Zsa-Zsa Korda. **Below:** Wes Anderson proves unequalled when it comes to jazz hands.

Cera knew he was going to say yes before reading the script, but when he arrived in Berlin for shooting, there was still one key element he and Anderson hadn't yet broached. "We hadn't really discussed [the accent]," says Cera. "We had to find the right calibration of it where it's not embarrassing or ridiculous. I wanted it to be kind of a playful accent." As well as working with an accent coach, Cera had a Norwegian friend record the lines for him as a reference. "I don't know whether Norwegians will be, like, vomiting when they hear this," he jokes.

Anderson's precisely planned way of working — he shows the cast animatics of each scene before shooting, so they can see the careful choreography — might seem at odds with many of the loose, semi-improvised comedies Cera is known for, but he says he loved the discipline of the full Anderson experience. "You kind of drill it until it becomes muscle memory," he says of rehearsals. "And you get the luxury of doing as many takes as you need." One particularly complicated sequence involving the actor took over 30. "It's unlike any other kind of movie-making experience. It feels like Wes' machine that he's built over many years." And it seems very right that Cera is finally a cog in that machine.

THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME IS IN CINEMAS FROM 23 MAY

Alamy, Disney, Getty Images, Searchlight, Warner Bros.

THE MONTHLY MIXTAP

EMPIRE MIXMASTER
AMON WARMANN SELECTS
THIS MONTH'S
ESSENTIAL TUNES

'ANAKIN VS. OBI-WAN' JOHN WILLIAMS

STAR WARS: REVENGE OF THE SITH RE-RELEASE
With its swirling strings and haunting choir, Williams' stirring music conveys the gravity and dread of this momentous battle.

'OXYGENE' FLYING LOTUS

ASH

A pulsing, synth-heavy arrangement sets an eerie tone for this psychedelic sci-fi horror. Both come from rapper-turned filmmaker Flying Lotus, making his violent, vivid big-screen debut.

'(YOU'RE THE) DEVIL IN DISGUISE' ELVIS PRESLEY

LILO & STITCH TRAILER

The King was key to the original Disney animation and the buzzy live-action adaptation pays homage with this racy song that mirrors Stitch's chaotic cuteness.

'RAMBLIN' DOWN THE ROAD' SADIE SINK

O'DESSA

The titular O'Dessa dreams of following in her father's footsteps in this sweet and contemplative tune, elevated by a hum-worthy melody and Sink's laidback vocals.

'DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN MAIN THEME' THE NEWTON BROTHERS

DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN

John Paesano's theme from the original Netflix series is rendered even more melancholic by a plaintive piano and a sombre choir.

LISTEN NOW! HEAD TO THE EMPIRE SPOTIFY ACCOUNT TO
HEAR ALL OF THE ABOVE



AN OSCAR-WINNING DOC'S BIG-SCREEN BATTLE

WHY *NO OTHER LAND* HAS YET TO SCORE A MAJOR AMERICAN RELEASE DESPITE ITS PERILOUS JOURNEY AND MULTIPLE AWARDS

IT'S BEEN A trajectory that has veered between triumph and terror. In late March, *No Other Land* co-director Hamdan Ballal, a Palestinian, was attacked by Israeli settlers, and then detained and later released by the Israeli military, on the West Bank of his home country. Just weeks earlier, a standing ovation had filled LA's Dolby Theatre when the film — about the forcible displacement of Palestinians under Israeli occupation — scooped up this year's Best Documentary Oscar.

The four filmmakers behind it, two of whom are Palestinian (Basel Adra and Ballal), and two Israeli (Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor), addressed the applauding crowd with urgency in light of the ongoing crisis in Gaza. "There is a different path, a political solution without ethnic supremacy, with national rights for both of our people," said Abraham. "And I have to say, as I am here, the foreign policy in this country is helping to block this path."

No Other Land — which takes place between 2019 and 2023 — has found itself at the epicentre of the film industry's heated and divisive stances on the war. After winning a major non-fiction award at the Berlin Film Festival in 2024, Abraham received instant death threats. And now, even an Oscar win has failed to secure a US distributor (the documentary can be watched on Channel 4's free streaming service in the UK), leading the filmmakers to self-distribute directly to independent cinemas while they still have some buzz behind them.

Yet this has presented its own set of challenges. One venue — the O Cinema in Miami — was threatened



Top to bottom: Words, not war; The sinister silhouette of a tank; The four filmmakers with their Oscars.

with eviction in March for hosting sold-out screenings. Over 600 directors signed a letter urging Miami Beach commissioners to reject the proposal.

The eviction proposal has since been withdrawn, but *No Other Land's* theatrical future remains uncertain. The Academy's voting body may have been aligned in its support of the film and the unlikely alliance between its filmmakers, but in this rare instance, Hollywood as a whole isn't ready to follow suit. "There are still conversations happening and we are still holding onto this hope that a big distributor will have the minimal amount of courage to take on [the] film," Abraham has said. Until then, the release of *No Other Land*, and the filmmakers' safety, remain in jeopardy. **BETH WEBB**



Bringing fresh mojo to the dojo

THE FILMMAKER BEHIND **KARATE KID: LEGENDS** ON INJECTING AN ICONIC FRANCHISE WITH NEW ENERGY

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

SINCE THE START, the *Karate Kid* franchise has behaved like an actual karate contestant. With the 1984 classic *The Karate Kid*, the rookie saga enjoyed an early victory and then an impressive enough follow-up fight with 1986's sequel, before disappointing in its next bout, 1989's *The Karate Kid Part III*. It reinvented itself with new vigour for 2010's reboot *The Karate Kid*, starring Jaden Smith, before making a triumphant comeback

with Netflix's *Cobra Kai*. And now...

Okay, this metaphor can only handle so much, but in a show of strength, the franchise is currently teaming up with, well, itself. Jonathan Entwistle's *Karate Kid: Legends* unites Ralph Macchio's OG karate kid, who turned sensei in *Cobra Kai*, with the 2010 film's wise sage Mr Han (Jackie Chan). Here, young Li Fong (Ben Yang) comes to New York City from Beijing, runs into trouble and enters a karate contest. Same old, same old, right? Not quite.

This is an "inverse version" of the tried-and-tested formula, says Entwistle. "We're not seeing the origin of a kid learning martial arts and moving up to overcome something. Where we begin, he's already quite highly trained and takes on the role of the master." And the film mixes things up across the board. The 2010 movie, despite its title, in fact showcased kung fu, and here, through Mr Han and LaRusso, Li Fong blends that with karate.

In Yang, the franchise also stars — not a moment too soon — an East Asian lead (Yang hails from China; his family later emigrated to the United States). "It was about making an authentic story that would blend the worlds correctly," says Entwistle of his casting. "We had to have somebody who, bare minimum, was a great actor but also fluent in Mandarin, fluent in English, and also fluent in martial arts to a point that would allow us to do a lot of the work in-camera, which we did."

Yang, says Entwistle, rose to the challenge by doing a lot of his own stunts. "Ben was fully training every day with the Chinese stunt team. He knew that I wanted the martial arts in the movie to feel like an early Jackie Chan film, and

Alamy, Illustration: Russell Moorcroft



Clockwise from main: Jackie Chan teaches Ben Yang; Rigorous roof training; Ralph Macchio returns to the big screen; Kicking off; Director Jonathan Entwistle.

that's something we tried really hard to do. We used a lot of classic Hong Kong wire-work."

It was the spirit of those films that Entwistle wanted to capture, he explains. "There's a humour to the way the choreography unfolds. Something that Jackie — and the team — taught us was, 'What's the narrative for the fight? Does he pick up a thing off the floor and use that?' We're so used to seeing fights done in a certain way, VFX-heavy fight augmentation, the Marvel style of fighting. It was important for me to bring back an in-camera martial-arts approach."

Chan himself, says Entwistle, arrived "like Dumbledore. From Day One he was straight into doing his own stunts." And what of Macchio: the original karate kid? "To see Daniel LaRusso back on the big screen again is special," smiles the director. "With *Cobra Kai*, Ralph has had the opportunity to open the world up to what became of Daniel. But this being a movie is really meaningful: in that regard it means that Ralph gets a final swansong." Wax on, wax off, clock out.

KARATE KID: LEGENDS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 30 MAY

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON...
CHILDREN OF BLOOD AND BONE



IT'S ALREADY GOT BIG HYPE BEHIND IT

Gina Prince-Bythewood's upcoming fantasy epic is adapted from Tomi Adeyemi's chart-topping young-adult novel. Adeyemi serves as screenwriter and producer on the film, which follows teenager Zélie as she battles to restore magic to her homeland, Orisha, in defiance of the kingdom's tyrannical ruling class. With the book boasting 'snow leoponaires' — huge beasts with thick spikes protruding from their spines — and vengeful spirits, expect Afrofuturist world-building while the story tackles heavyweight topics like authoritarianism and colourism.

A LONG TIME COMING

Such was the hype around *Children Of Blood And Bone* that the movie rights were snapped up by Fox 2000 Pictures before the book was even published in 2017. However after Disney's takeover, the rights lapsed, sparking a huge bidding war with studios believing the film to be the new *Hunger Games*. Paramount sealed the deal in 2022. "Children Of Blood And Bone has not only become a phenomenon in the YA world, it has transformed every expectation of what world-building fantasy can be," said Paramount president Daria Cercek.

IN CAPABLE HANDS

Prince-Bythewood was announced as director in 2023, and collaborated with Adeyemi on the screenplay. "What Gina

does so well is tell these deep, complex stories of women who look like us front and centre, with incredible action set-pieces, incredible cinematography," Adeyemi said of the filmmaker, who, along with *The Woman King*, has helmed *The Old Guard* and *Love & Basketball*.

THE CAST IS STACKED

Thuso Mbedu, who worked with Prince-Bythewood on *The Woman King*, will play Zélie. Newly minted Oscar nominee Cynthia Erivo joins her as the fearsome Admiral Kaea, Zélie's ally and a skilled naval commander. Meanwhile, Chiwetel Ejiofor plays the villainous King Saran, Amandla Sandberg his headstrong daughter Princess Amari and *Supacell's* Tosin Cole is Zélie's older brother, Tzain. And it doesn't end there: Idris Elba, Lashana Lynch and Viola Davis add yet more star power, while an open casting call for young actors living in Nigeria hopes to rein in new talent.

IT COULD LEAD TO A FRANCHISE

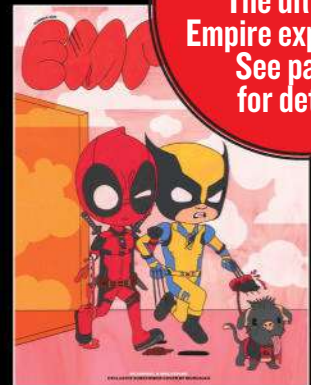
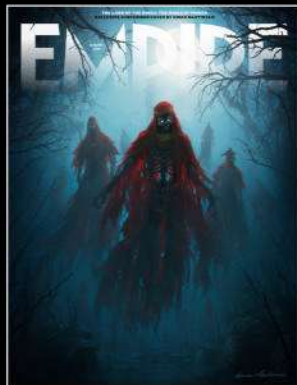
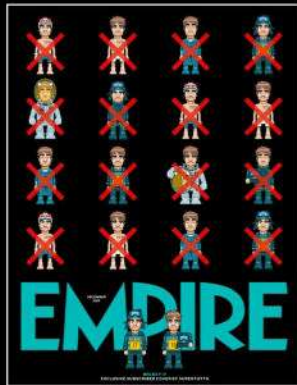
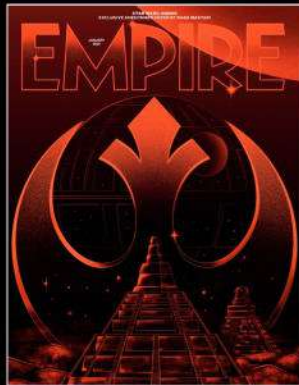
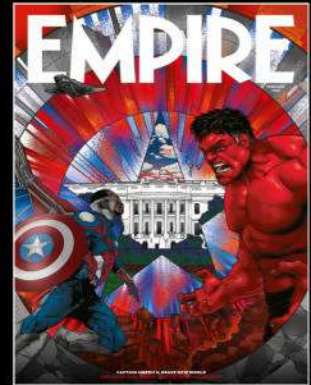
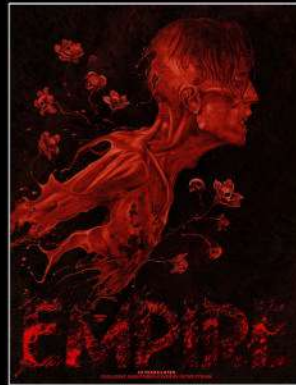
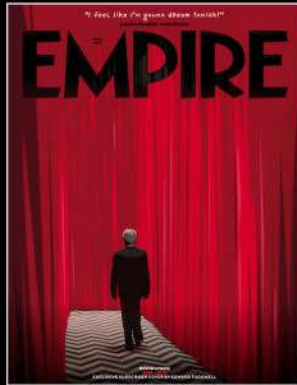
The book kicks off the *Legacy Of Orisha* trilogy, which concluded in June 2024 and, to date, has collectively sold nearly three million copies. Given the way studios have been falling over themselves to nab Adeyemi's bestselling IP, you could bet your weight in snow leoponaires that Zélie's big-screen journey will continue. **TARA OKEKE**

CHILDREN OF BLOOD AND BONE

IS IN CINEMAS IN 2027

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How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Antony Starr

THE *G20* AND *THE BOYS*
BADDIE ON THE JOYS OF
A SIMPLE SANDWICH

WORDS JAMIE GRAHAM



Whose poster did you have on your wall as a kid?

I had a surfer because I grew up in New Zealand, on a beach. [It was] this Australian guy called Mark Occhilupo. I still surf whenever I can. I have a camper van and I love going up the beautiful Californian coastline with my dogs. We filmed *G20* in South Africa [but] I wasn't going to get in the water there — too many sharks!

What one thing do you do better than anyone else you know?

Find excuses to get out of social events. I make plans and then 99.9 per cent of the time, on the day, I'm like, "Oh my God, I really don't want to do that." I've run out of family members and friends who are sick. Covid was wonderful for me, in that respect, and only that respect. At one point I'd actually saved a photo of a Covid test that was positive so I could say, "I'm sorry..."

How much is a pint of milk?

My dad's English, from Bristol, so I'm familiar with pints. But I don't know how much a pint of milk is. Here, milk's about five bucks, but it's bigger than a pint. I do my own shopping, and I've never had a cleaner. I think it's important, metaphorically — and literally — to wipe your own butt. And I love vacuuming. I'm never going to give up my vacuuming.

What film makes you cry?

Awakenings. De Niro's character is called Leonard and he's catatonic. This drug

experimentation gets him out of it, and then he's starting to worsen again. Robin Williams' [neurologist] character comes in to find Leonard on the floor, whimpering, "Help me, help me." Oh God. That could get me now.

Schwarzenegger or Stallone?

Schwarzenegger, hands down! Me and a friend watched *Commando*, back in VHS days, until the tape turned to shit. Though I did like Rambo. Back then, I preferred the second one because there was more violence. I've done action but I don't think of myself as a modern-day Schwarzenegger or Stallone because I have mirrors in my house and can see my body type. There's no risk of comparison!

Do you have any scars?

I'm not going into emotional scars because I haven't got a couch and you haven't got all day. Physical scars? Not exciting ones, like that scene in *Jaws*, when they're comparing. I had surgery on my wrist once. I snapped a tendon. We had to do a lot of fight scenes in [2013 Cinemax series] *Banshee* and I had this injury, so the only way we could accommodate it was to write it in. The character had this revolting bandage for two seasons. People kept asking about it. Then it actually got a Twitter handle: @lucasbandage.

What's your favourite sandwich?

Me and my dad would get up and watch the football. I mean soccer — proper football. The

World Cup. It would always be the middle of the night in New Zealand, and we'd have cheese and onion. White bread. Maybe a bit of margarine. Really basic. Gorgeous. Maybe I'll make one now and send a photo to my old man.

Do you have a nickname?

Ant. It's super-creative. Just chop the back end off and there you go.

Do you have a favourite superhero?

I feel obliged to give Homelander some support because everyone hates him so much! (*Ponders*) It's not really a superhero, but it's from that world... I loved Joaquin Phoenix's Joker. The first movie was incredible. It was anchored in a very deep, dark reality. I tend to love the villains. I've played a few now and you're not a conduit for the audience, so it leaves you so much room to play. But *Joker* was an interesting movie because he was the conduit. I'd watch Joaquin Phoenix read the phone book.

What do you want written on your tombstone?

Shit, it's a bit early in the day to be thinking about my own death. You know what? It would be: "Antony Starr, 1975 to, hopefully, 2075", and then: "He tried." It could be taken as a pat on the head. Actually, it would be: "Bless him, he tried." We've sorted it. I'm going to phone my lawyers right now.

G20 IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 10 APRIL



reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

10 APRIL - 7 MAY 2025 | EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT

★★★★★
EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES



The SEALs move through hostile territory.



Top to bottom: Navy SEAL Erik (Will Poulter) feels the strain; Soldiering on; Brothers in arms.

WATCH FIRST

Co-director Ray Mendoza previously produced the 2016 docu-drama series *The Warfighters*, which took a similarly unrelenting approach in chronicling the War On Terror, with testimony from real soldiers.

FILM

WARFARE

ALEX GARLAND HEADS BACK TO A CONFLICT ZONE



OUT 18 APRIL / CERT TBC / 95 MINS

DIRECTORS Alex Garland, Ray Mendoza

CAST D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai, Cosmo Jarvis, Will Poulter, Joseph Quinn

PLOT 2006, Ramadi, Iraq. Seizing an apartment to surveil the area, a group of Navy SEALs find themselves bombarded by Al-Qaeda insurgents.

APPROPRIATELY, *WARFARE* BEGINS with a deafening assault, as Eric Prydz's horny 2004 aerobics video for 'Call On Me' fills the screen, its sweaty, hormonal hardbodies lunging and lurching. We wonder what, in 2025, we've done to deserve this, before the film cuts to a group of grinning, hollering young soldiers watching the video — a tight-knit unit getting their rocks off. These are the young men we're going to be spending the next hour-and-a-half with; this, of all things, is the calm before the storm.

For a film that, in time, consistently attacks the senses, this opening is fittingly jarring, but it also speaks to the economy of it all. There is no dialogue in the scene: swiftly and wordlessly (other than Steve Winwood's relentless vocals), it shows us how ingrained this group are with one another, how comfortable, how close. And for its entirety, *Warfare* is as compact as it gets. There's not an ounce of fat on it.

For the first 30 minutes, there is little action. It's 2006, and this is a Navy SEAL unit staking out a residential area, seizing an apartment from a terrified Iraqi family in the dead of night, setting up shop with their sniper rifles as they observe persons of interest across the street. "The film uses only their memories," we read of the team at the start: it is a true story, and everything we see is constructed entirely from the reminiscences of Ray Mendoza (played here by D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai) and his comrades. Mendoza, who became a military advisor in the film industry (including on Garland's *Civil War*) after leaving the forces, co-directs with Garland: broadly, Mendoza worked with the actors while Garland took care of the camerawork, and they wrote the film together. As they have explained, there is no dramatic invention whatsoever. And the script is spare. The film never smells of screenwriting. As the group sit around the apartment preparing

to strike, there is a lot of chemistry but no banter. No bullshit. No backstories. No monologues. Just the work. As a result, we feel embedded too.

Soon, and suddenly, they are bombarded by Al-Qaeda insurgents, and once the battle begins, it doesn't stop, until the credits roll. Your heart-rate gets a workout. Shot in, more or less, real time, the film is on a simple mission: to get us as close as possible, from the safety of our cinema seats, to what war is actually like. As such, once it kicks in, there is no respite. They were not afforded any, so neither are we. "Dude," says one of them at one point, "I'm fucked up."

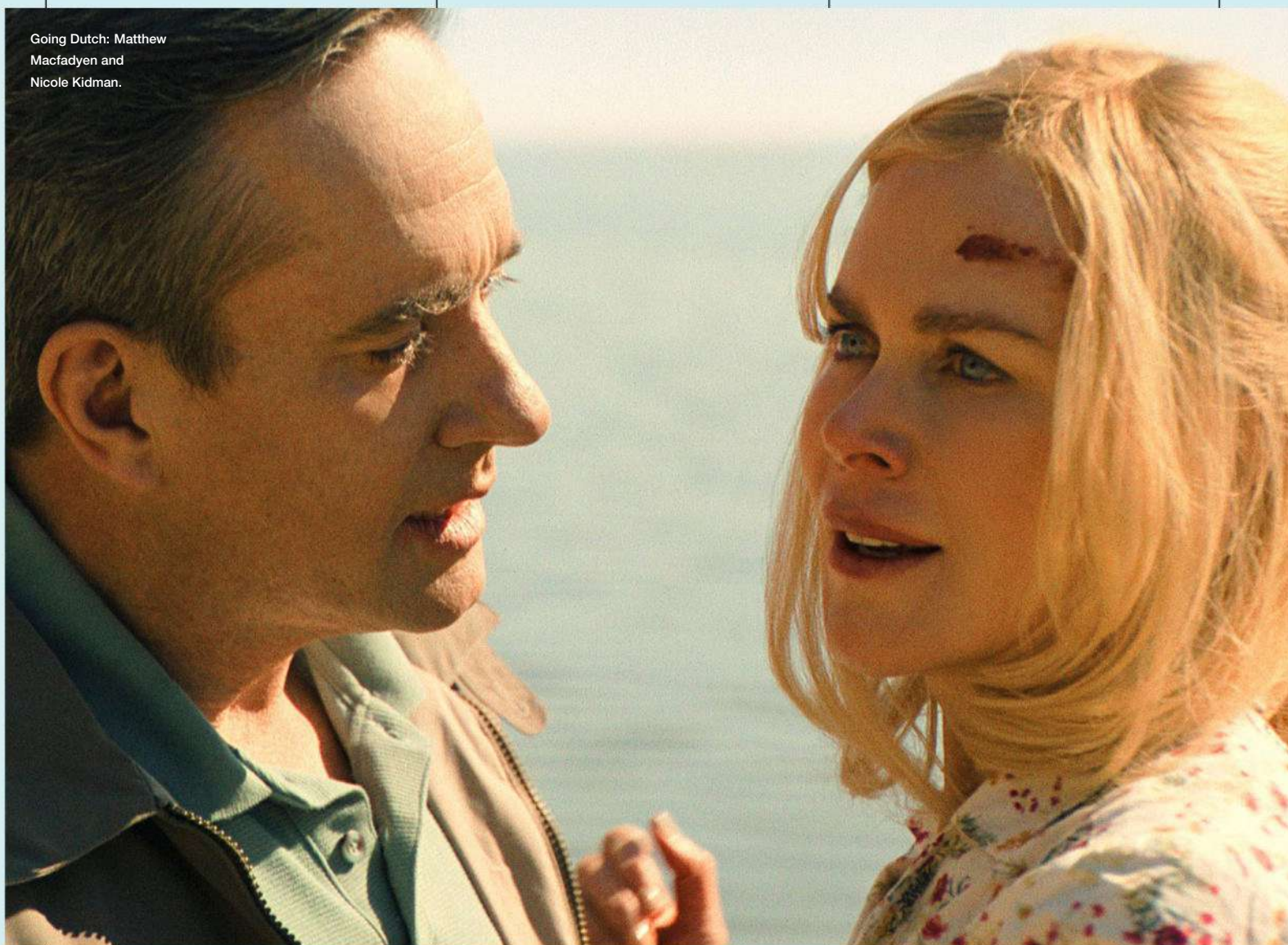
For the initial stretch, the camera is calm and studied, but as the team's fortunes spiral it gets much closer, looser, to vivid effect: one sequence on the street is so immersive you find yourself ducking to avoid the bullet-spray. The camera surveys the damage, an unblinking witness to trauma: the second half of the film is a portrait of pain, and the horror is in the detail. The dry, cracked lips. Faces caked in dust and debris. The sheer terror in the eyes, the helpless shock and panic. It is loud and upsetting. Sound is key: in the pounding gunshots, in the ground-shaking explosions, in the ear-splitting roar of fighter jets, and in the agonising screams of the soldiers. RIP your local-cinema speakers. Yet for all it milks everything the medium offers, the filmmakers never get in the way. There are no showy visual flourishes, in their place just lean, mean storytelling.

Due to its source material, *Warfare* focuses on the Americans, but presents the situation from their perspective without the directors politicising. *Everybody* here is screwed. It may well be cinema's most effective, purest anti-war film: there is no sentimentality, no hand-wringing, but most significantly not a second of it makes war look cool, or attractive. There is no score, Garland and Mendoza trusting the cast and the action to do the emotional heavy-lifting; no orchestral propping-up is necessary. Such simplicity makes it even more heartbreaking. It is deeply compassionate. So no, it's not going to encourage anyone to sign up to the military in a hurry, but it is absolutely a tribute to those who do.

At the end, what's left is rubble, physically and spiritually. And yet cinematically, *Warfare* is an exhilarating piece of work, because we have the luxury of experiencing it all, in all its power, at very close quarters, without getting hurt. Physically, in any case. **ALEX GODFREY**

VERDICT War is hell, and *Warfare* refuses to shy away from it. Free of the operatics of most supposed anti-war films, it's all the more effective for its simplicity. It is respectfully gruelling.

Going Dutch: Matthew Macfadyen and Nicole Kidman.



FILM

HOLLAND

NICOLE KIDMAN'S PERFECT LIFE IS SHATTERED (AGAIN)

★★

OUT NOW (PRIME VIDEO) / CERT TBC / 108 MINS

DIRECTOR Mimi Cave

CAST Nicole Kidman, Gael García Bernal, Matthew Macfadyen, Jude Hill

PLOT When Nancy Vandergroot (Kidman) suspects her husband (Macfadyen) is having an affair, she uncovers an even darker mystery.

YOU'VE ALREADY SEEN this Nicole Kidman movie. She's a housewife and loving mother. She cooks dinner every night and looks gorgeous doing it. But there's something wrong with her seemingly comfortable life, whether it be scheming spouses, a sudden tragedy, or — in the case of *The Stepford Wives* — a town that wants to turn her into a robot tradwife. Despite the white picket fences and the picture-perfect nuclear family, there's an inner

turmoil that betrays the shiny veneer of all-American suburbia. She always feels one thing: suffocated.

The deviation from the formula in Mimi Cave's disappointing second feature is that Kidman's Nancy Vandergroot lives in Holland. No, not that one — this is Holland, Michigan, an uncanny facsimile of the idyllic town's Dutch counterpart, complete with a towering windmill and an annual tulip festival. Cave's debut *Fresh* cleverly saw Sebastian Stan's charming charisma mask a penchant for cannibalism, which would seem to suggest that *Holland* will uncover a similarly seedy underbelly. Cinematographer Pawel Pogorzelski, an Ari Aster regular, captures the town with storybook-like vibrancy, but the unconventional location functions as little more than kitschy window-dressing, one that could be swapped out for any other small-minded midwestern town.

Andrew Sodroski's meandering script equally fails to live up to that promise of something stranger. When Nancy begins to question her husband Fred's (Matthew Macfadyen, still in Tom Wambsgans mode) frequent out-of-town work trips, she launches an amateur investigation into his potential infidelity. Joining her is Dave, played by a criminally underused Gael García Bernal

in a role that allows the film to barely graze the reality of being the only person of colour in an all-white town. If this sounds like a straightforward thriller straight from an airport novel, you're not far off, even as Nancy eventually discovers Fred's secret.

The bonnets and clogs of Holland, Michigan work as a shorthand for unnerving conformity that Kidman gamely plays up to. In the film's opening scene, she stares down the lens with a vacant grin, like a pristine doll robbed of autonomy. But in her latest role in a storied lineage of disgruntled wives, Kidman is in cruise control, delivering a performance that's as reliably transfixing as she always is, but not quite peak Kidman. The daring conviction of *Babygirl* is a tough act to follow, and the star is hardly flexing any new muscles through Nancy's descent into paranoia. Cave's film admirably strives for something original, but there's an unavoidable feeling that everyone involved has been here before.

IANA MURRAY

VERDICT Nicole Kidman has perfected the art of the wronged housewife, but that's not enough to elevate the shallow nightmare of *Holland*. This derivative thriller is in need of some Dutch courage.



ADOLESCENCE

★★★★★

OUT NOW (NETFLIX) / EPISODES VIEWED 4 OF 4

DIRECTOR Philip Barantini

CAST Stephen Graham, Ashley Walters, Erin Doherty, Owen Cooper

After collaborating on *Boiling Point*, Stephen Graham and director Philip Barantini have reunited for another tense four-parter. Like the film that series was based on, each episode of this new show is shot in one continuous take. But instead of screaming bloody murder at pots and pans, the script here, by Graham and Jack Thorne, deals with an actual murder, one that tears the local community apart. It's heavy stuff, but extraordinary. The performances are remarkable: Graham plays a walking bruise of a man; Ashley Walters brings warmth to the investigating officer who arrested his son; while 15-year-old Owen Cooper astounds. It all results in a triumph of creative and technical artistry — one of the year's finest so far. **DO**



IN THE LOST LANDS

★★

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 101 MINS

DIRECTOR Paul W.S. Anderson

CAST Milla Jovovich, Dave Bautista, Arly Jover

In this adaptation of a short story by *Game Of Thrones* writer George R.R. Martin, director Paul W.S. Anderson casts his favourite muse (and wife) Milla Jovovich as Gray Alys, a powerful witch who enlists skilled hunter Boyce (Dave Bautista) on her quest to find a magical power in the post-apocalyptic Lost Lands. On paper, this is the basis for a fun fantasy caper. In reality, it's a visually ugly, narratively convoluted mess, with action that's hamstrung by poor spatial geography and — what with Alys' seemingly all-powerful skillset — a distinct lack of tension. Plus, Bautista and Jovovich are unable to stir up the romantic chemistry needed for the third-act revelations to have any impact. Do yourselves a favour and watch *Mad Max: Fury Road* instead — dystopia done right. **AW**



Here: DEA(d) man Ray (Brian Tyree Henry).

Below: Kate Mulgrew: "spectacular".

TV

DOPE THIEF

THE DRUGS DON'T WORK

★★★★★

OUT NOW (APPLE TV+) / EPISODES VIEWED 8 OF 8

SHOWRUNNER Peter Craig

CAST Brian Tyree Henry, Wagner Moura, Kate Mulgrew, Marin Ireland

PLOT Two Philly felons inadvertently rip off a major drug operation, putting them on the wrong side of a cartel, a gang of bikers, and the cops.

DOPE THIEF OPENS with a bang. Two DEA agents storm a stash-house in Philadelphia, subdue the suspects, control the room and carry out a thorough search of the premises, turning up both narcotics and cash. The operation is efficient, detailed and by the numbers. "Just because we're not real law enforcement," insists Ray (Brian Tyree Henry), "doesn't mean we're not professional."

Manny (Wagner Moura) and Ray bring home the bacon by posing as federal agents and ripping off small-time dealers. The pair see it as a low-risk, moderate-reward hustle that doubles as public service — a benevolent cull, if you will, only of crankheads' pocket money instead of badgers. The scam goes tits up when they strike it (un)lucky with a huge haul of cash at what turns out to be a cartel-backed meth lab catering to twerkers up and down the entire East Coast.

It's a reliable yet simple set-up for a crime yarn — basically-decent petty thieves get in way over their heads — playing out over nearly eight tense, tightly structured hours. But the triumph of this limited series, adapted by showrunner Peter Craig (*The Town*, *The Batman*) from Dennis Tafoya's 2009 novel, is less in the construction of the encapsulating thriller than in the gratifying detail of its character work.

From the very first episode (energetically directed by one Ridley Scott, neatly setting the tone), Ray and Manny prove enormously engaging company. Henry and Moura's rolling banter forms



the basis for an easy-going chemistry, their characters lapsing into the same goofy familiarity we can easily imagine they've enjoyed since their years together as young offenders. As much as *Dope Thief* concerns itself with the aftermath of the ill-fated heist, the core of the series is this warm, heartfelt friendship and the cracks that begin to (understandably) show under the likelihood of impending torture and death.

The shockwaves ripple outwards too, pulling in everyone from Manny's long-suffering girlfriend Sherry (Liz Caribel Sierra) to pro bono lawyer and unexpected Meat Loaf fan Michelle (Nesta Cooper), to Ray's incarcerated father (Ving Rhames) and his doting yet irascible mother-figure (Kate Mulgrew, on spectacular form). Whether it's a hilariously chaotic scene in which Manny gets balled out in Spanish by Sherry and her mother, or a recently shot Ray munching happily on a neighbour's fruitcake, the interactions are shot through with a darkly infectious sense of humour, Craig keeping a firm hand on tone so that even when things look bleak, the show never feels oppressive.

The unravelling crime conspiracy does become a touch convoluted as it goes on, but with a series of superbly directed set-pieces that lean as hard on character beats as they do action (a disorientating raid on an Amish meth house being a standout), and a clutch of knockout central performances, *Dope Thief* is a wild ride that you just won't want to quit. **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT Part crime thriller, part (extremely dark) buddy comedy, *Dope Thief* is not only a great time in front of the telly, but a stellar showcase for Henry and Moura's electrifying chemistry.

Who's that behind
the maaaask?

FILM

SNOW WHITE

NOT THE FAIREST DISNEY
REMAKE OF THEM ALL



OUT NOW / CERT PG / 109 MINS

DIRECTOR Marc Webb

CAST Rachel Zegler, Gal Gadot, Andrew Burnap, Ansu Kabia, Tituss Burgess, Jeremy Swift, Martin Klebba

PLOT When the Evil Queen (Gadot) commands that her stepdaughter Snow White (Zegler) must be killed, the princess must somehow fight for her people.

THE ORIGINAL ANIMATED 1937 *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs* was branded “Disney’s folly” before release, but soon became a landmark artistic and box-office success. This new live-action version, while similarly plagued with bad buzz and reports of creative chaos, seems unlikely to have such a lasting or significant impact. Despite committed

performances from its leads and years of edits and re-edits, it can’t establish a consistent tone through its real and artificial locations.

Director Marc Webb follows the Kenneth Branagh *Cinderella* playbook closely: he gives his hero a plucky mantra and a love interest with a backstory that goes beyond “charming”. Rachel Zegler’s wide-eyed Snow White doesn’t just hope her prince will come; she wants to be a good leader for her people, restore their faith in the social contract and with it, their empathy for one another. That’s commendable (and politically timely), but the film hits you over the head with it repeatedly; cut through any frame and you’ll find “girl power” etched in the grain.

She’s up against a thoroughly camp Gal Gadot as the Evil Queen, cinched tight in jewels and slinking around being unrepentantly evil. So we go through the usual beats of the story: Snow White loses her saintly parents, but not before her father has remarried a thorough baddie. She is then put to work as a maid in her own palace before the queen becomes jealous of her beauty and orders her execution — only for Snow White to escape and take refuge with some small miners. (Andrew Burnap, as the bandit leader Jonathan who stands in for a prince this time, does his best to channel Cary Elwes in *The Princess Bride*, but is marooned

when the film forgets about him at key moments.)

And of course there are songs, which Zegler delivers beautifully, from the original tunes (not including ‘Someday My Prince Will Come’, which has been judged a little needy) to the largely successful new Pasek and Paul additions. Gadot nails her big showtune and has a lot of fun getting her evil on; the film offers a clever wrinkle that the Queen’s magical powers somehow derive from her beauty, so that Snow White’s growing good looks pose an existential rather than a mere egotistical threat.

That would all be fine, and in fact will probably play gangbusters with little girls everywhere thanks to Zegler’s determined cheer and willingness to take command. In true ‘manager’ style she whistles while everyone else works; she’s cute but not overly focused on being likeable. If her Snow’s pronouncements sometimes feel like self-empowerment by numbers, at least she shows that Zegler was right when she promised that this hero would be more of a leader, and her relationships more developed, than the undeniably passive original.

But then there are the dwarves. An unholy

KEEP 'EM PEELED

The character of The Prince from the original film finally earns an actual name here: Jonathan (Andrew Burnap). In other Disney media he has sometimes been referred to as Florian, Henrich and Ferdinand.



Top to bottom: Love is in the air for Jonathan (Andrew Burnap) and Snow (Rachel Zegler); The Evil Queen (Gal Gadot) knows how to make an entrance; Old-school avian pal.

VFX disaster, they slow the film to a crawl every time they appear, and there's no sense of their glowing, enchanted forest meshing with scenes shot in real woodlands, or of the dwarves themselves belonging alongside live people. The original Disney designs showcased the squash and stretch of classic animation, but echoing the same look in 'live' action is alienating. The film was criticised for proposing to use actors with dwarfism in the roles and also for denying them work, so you can understand that the filmmakers might have felt caught in a trap, but this is no solution. It feels like Jonathan's bandits were at one point intended as substitutes for the original septet, but instead they now stand alongside patently fake characters who don't feel or look right.

It's no shame on Zegler, Gadot or even Webb, who you can feel straining for impact in bits of zippy dialogue or a fun comic moment. There are scenes and sequences here that work beautifully, thanks to them. But the film feels compromised and so small; like it's been Frankensteined into submission in the edit and cut and recut 100 times. You can sense studio interference, scared to put dwarves in the film but also frightened to leave them out; afraid to focus on a princess but reluctant to reimagine her too far; terrified to lean into cartooniness or to rely on realism. Disney has attempted to just replicate the past instead of trying to do something new. That's the greatest folly of all.

HELEN O'HARA

VERDICT It's at its best when it's an old-fashioned song-and-dance princess story, with Zegler and Gadot broad but effective, and at its worst in any scene involving the digital dwarves.



Original gangster: Robert De Niro as Frank Costello and (below) Vito Genovese.

FILM

THE ALTO KNIGHTS

ROBERT DE NIRO: AM I TALKING TO ME?

★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 123 MINS

DIRECTOR Barry Levinson

CAST Robert De Niro, Debra Messing, Cosmo Jarvis, Kathrine Narducci, Michael Rispoli

PLOT Mob bosses Frank Costello (De Niro) and Vito Genovese (De Niro) vie for power in 1950s New York.

IF THE DIGITAL de-ageing of the holy trinity of Robert De Niro, Al Pacino and Joe Pesci in Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* was a bit distracting at times, get a load of double De Niro in Barry Levinson's long-gestating crime thriller *The Alto Knights*. Demonstrating that when it comes to the greats you can never have too much of a good thing, De Niro plays both leading roles: that of don Frank Costello, on the verge of a quiet retirement, and his hot-headed childhood friend and drug baron Vito Genovese, with whom he's forced to go toe-to-toe.

Based on a true story of Mob warfare and penned by *GoodFellas* screenwriter Nicholas Pileggi, the film has been in the works since the 1970s and was finally greenlit in 2022. Watching the early sequences certainly gives one a sense of *déjà vu*: the film opens *in medias res* in 1957 with an act of violence, narration from Frank kicks in, and rapid montages of archive footage draws us into this bygone world of New York Mafia power struggles. *The Alto Knights* being a social club they frequented. It all feels like handsomely crafted Scorsese-lite, but enjoyably so, like sinking into a shabby but much-loved armchair.

De Niro puts in a typically solid, commanding performance as big boss Frank but is clearly having more fun chewing the scenery



beneath layers of prosthetics as the volatile Vito, who was born, fittingly, beneath Mount Vesuvius. These former friends and complete opposites have two major scenes together in which they seamlessly interact.

Director Barry Levinson — best known for *Good Morning Vietnam*, *Bugsy*, and the Oscar-winning *Rain Man* — clearly takes pleasure in winding De Niro up and watching him go, even if at times it feels like De Niro plays Vito more like a Joe Pesci impression than a real person. Support comes from Cosmo Jarvis as Frank's wife, but the standout is *The Sopranos*' Kathrine Narducci as a fiery club owner who gives Vito as good as he gets.

The Alto Knights seems to be aiming for an elegiac tone similar to that of *The Irishman*, nostalgically mourning both a lost time and a neglected film genre. What's missing is the close friendship we're told that Frank and Vito shared as young men; a few scant flashbacks aren't quite enough for us to invest in this apparently seismic betrayal.

Unexpectedly, the film finds more of a groove in its sillier moments, most memorably a farcical sequence of ageing mobsters trying to flee an al fresco meet-up in upstate New York where they've been cornered by the cops. It's hardly a return to the golden age of gangster movies, but it's always a pleasure to see De Niro toast his rivals' downfall. **LAURA VENNING**

VERDICT It may be occasionally clunky and rambling, like a story told by a grandparent, but *The Alto Knights* reminds us that De Niro will always be cinema's greatest gangster.



Here: Gunning for trouble: Şopé Dirisù (left) returns as Elliot. Below: Michelle Fairley as matriarch Marian.

TV

GANGS OF LONDON: SEASON 3

BIG SMOKE, BIG ACTION, BIG BUCKETS OF CLARET

★★★★

OUT NOW (SKY/NOW) / EPISODES VIEWED 8 OF 8

SHOWRUNNERS Kim Hong-Sun, Peter McKenna
CAST Şopé Dirisù, Michelle Fairley, Joe Cole, Lucian Msamati, Narges Rashidi, T'Nia Miller, Andrew Koji

PLOT Elliot Carter (Dirisù) is now a full-blooded gangster. When things go sideways with a batch of spiked cocaine, the mayor of London (T'Nia Miller) goes on the warpath.

GANGS OF LONDON has always been best appreciated as an alternate-reality affair — a bit like *John Wick*, except people drive on the left and there's no hotel for hitmen. In this London the roads are free of traffic, nobody uses public transport, and a bullet-spewing gang war can rage without being interrupted by the police. It's a fantasy-crime slayground where anything can happen, as long as that "anything" is deadly serious (no jokes, no winks to the audience) and intensely, gratuitously violent. In short, if you're willing to suspend disbelief, and aren't squeamish, it's a pugilistic hoot.

Despite another change of showrunners (director Kim Hong-Sun and lead writer/exec producer Peter McKenna taking over from Season 2's Corin Hardy and Season 1's Gareth Evans and Matt Flannery), this latest instalment doesn't 'fahk' with the formula. It retains an entertainingly high plot-twist turnover and a flagrant disregard for character survivability, focusing more on inventive action sequences than credible dialogue or internal logic.

Ultraviolent highlights include a brutal fairground battle in Episode 1 and Episode 5's



tense stalk-and-slay encounter in an empty office block, which peaks with one goon being throttled by a freshly severed umbilical cord while the killer's new-born baby lies nearby. Kim might not quite match Evans and Flannery's OTT flair (who can?), but there's a reason he coined the phrase "blood opera".

Perhaps as a sign of the (dark) times, this season does introduce one new element: politics. This comes in the welcome form of N'Tia Miller as a coke-snorting London mayor who resolves that the best way to deal with her city's gargantuan gang problem is to legalise drugs. It's an interesting wrinkle, though any of this development's ethical subtleties are of course bulldozed over by the show's relentless quest for big, silly drama. *The Wire*, this ain't.

Gangs newbie Miller is joined by Richard Dormer as shillelagh-waving caricature Cornelius (psychotic brother to Michelle Fairley's icy matriarch Marian Wallace) and *Bullet Train*'s Andrew Koji as mystery hitman Zeek, this season's wild card. But at the eye of the storm remains Şopé Dirisù, still reliably soulful-yet-edgy as ever-beleaguered punchbag extraordinaire Elliot, who becomes embroiled in a conspiracy connected to the deaths of his wife and child seven years earlier. Along the way, his friends will become his enemies, his enemies will become his friends and then his enemies again, and he will dish out — and receive — a lot of pain. Will he ever catch a break? Honestly, going by these eight episodes, we hope not. **DAN JOLIN**

VERDICT It's about as divorced from reality as a British crime series can get: a ridiculously action-focused maximalist melodrama. We wouldn't have it any other way.



ONE TO ONE: JOHN & YOKO

★★★★

OUT 11 APRIL / CERT 15 / 101 MINS

DIRECTOR Kevin Macdonald

FEATURING John Lennon, Yoko Ono

Tethered to the only full-length concert that John Lennon performed outside of The Beatles, Kevin Macdonald's documentary captures in a fresh light how the musician and Yoko Ono were leading voices of a troubled generation. The cultural and political fabric of the early '70s is energetically fortified with archive news footage, recordings of the pair's phone conversations and TV interviews loaded with their big dreams and ideas, which do more than simply frame Lennon's live performances of songs like 'Come Together' and 'New York City'. It's the inclusion of Ono's independent life, however, from day-to-day tasks to broader tragedies, that makes for a more vivid, varied and intimate insight into their very public lives. **BW**



NE ZHA 2

★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 12A / 144 MINS

DIRECTOR Jiao Zi

CAST Lü Yanting, Han Mo, Lü Qi, Zhang Jiaming

The rise and rise of the Chinese animation *Ne Zha 2* is mythically impressive: it is now the fifth highest-grossing film of all time. For the uninitiated, it can be a dizzying affair, winning no points for coherence or economy of storytelling. The tale follows Ne Zha (Lü Yanting), a super-powered demon who must share his body with his frenemy from the first film, Ao Bing (Han Mo). The film's eccentric sense of humour walks a tonal tightrope between high-fantasy pomposity and wacky hijinks. Yet it is also operating on a scale rarely seen. At once awe-inspiring, jaw-dropping, eye-rolling and head-scratching, it doesn't always hang together, but *Ne Zha 2* has earned a place with the immortals. **JN**



Clockwise from main: Spy vs spy: Cate Blanchett and Michael Fassbender; Tuxedos: so last season; A lower-key espionage movie.



KILLER QUOTE

"It's been a while since we've had a traitor to dinner. At least knowingly."

KATHRYN ST. JEAN
(CATE BLANCHETT)

FILM

BLACK BAG

THE NAME'S WOODHOUSE.
GEORGE WOODHOUSE

★★★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 94 MINS

DIRECTOR Steven Soderbergh

CAST Cate Blanchett, Michael Fassbender, Marisa Abela, Tom Burke, Naomie Harris, Regé-Jean Page, Pierce Brosnan

PLOT Veteran British spy George Woodhouse (Fassbender) is charged with sniffing out a traitor in the midst of his agency. Could the rat be, in fact, his wife Kathryn (Blanchett)?

FOURTEEN YEARS AFTER announcing his retirement, Steven Soderbergh is busier than ever. *Black Bag* is his second film out this year — it arrives just two months after his unconventional ghost story *Presence* — and marks his third collaboration with prolific screenwriter David Koepp. And it's tremendous fun: think *Ocean's Eleven*, if they were spies. As

with his earlier, Vegas-set escapades, Soderbergh's camera is cool and confident; his handsome A-list cast are slick, sardonic and immaculately dressed; Koepp's script is punchy and sharp, full of mile-a-minute, back-and-forth rat-a-tat dialogue; and there's a light, fizzy David Holmes soundtrack, too.

It is even partly plotted like a heist, narratively doling out just enough morsels to keep us, the viewer, on the hook. Our hero here is a turtlenecked George Woodhouse (Michael Fassbender, as restrained and precise as he was in *The Killer*), an icy, George Smiley-coded operative in a British espionage agency. His mission becomes clear within the first five minutes: he must find the traitor in his agency, with a set of names outlining the possible suspects — a list that includes his beloved wife and colleague, Kathryn (Cate Blanchett).

The suspects are hastily and obviously assembled for an evening meal, with truth serum laced into one of the side dishes, leading to secrets and lies quickly emerging; like the diner scene in *Heat* or the poker scene in *Casino Royale*, Soderbergh deftly makes 'people sitting around a table' feel dynamic and thrilling. A steak knife gets involved. From this disastrous dining experience onwards, tangled webs beget

tangled webs, as we learn not to trust anyone, from George's snivelling underlings (Tom Burke, Regé-Jean Page) to their secretive partners (Naomie Harris, Marisa Abela).

A film about British spies immediately invokes a certain agent with a licence to kill, a comparison Soderbergh openly invites with the meta-casting of an actual Bond (Pierce Brosnan), a Moneypenny (Harris),

and a couple of longtime bookies' -favourite-Bonds (Fassbender, Page). But Koepp's script keeps things psychological and internal, always probing the motivations and inclinations of these highly skilled but deeply flawed "professional liars". What does it do to a psyche, the film ponders, to have secrets as your daily bread?

So there is very little in the way of action, if you were expecting that, and while it occasionally genuflects towards genre — there is a very silly-sounding MacGuffin called 'Severus', the kind of deadly cyberweapon which all these types of films must have, by law — its pleasures lie in the dialogue, the twists, the reveals. It all leads to a delightful, Agatha Christie-style drawing-room denouement. Like the film as a whole, it's deliciously, lip-smackingly satisfying. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT More John le Carré than James Bond, this is a very entertaining thriller, which applies Soderbergh's well-trodden heist mechanics to espionage with slickly rewarding results.

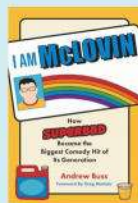
BOOKS

I AM McLOVIN

THE SOUP-TO-NUTSACK STORY OF *SUPERBAD*

★★★★★

AUTHOR ANDREW BUSS



AT THE HEIGHT of *Superbad*'s success, Christopher Mintz-Plasse, who played everyone's favourite dweeb McLovin, was chased out of a Chipotle by people shouting his character's line, "I got a boner." Eighteen years on, it's perhaps easy to forget the impact of Greg Mottola's teen comedy, and Andrew Buss' pacy, enjoyable book acts as an entertaining reminder. Elaborating on Buss' 2022 *Vanity Fair* oral history, *I Am McLovin* argues that *Superbad* is the defining comedy for its generation, winning millennial hearts via its mixture of no-holds-barred raunch and touching vulnerability. While it lacks fresh access and possibly overstates its subject's importance, Buss' book remains a vibrant celebration of noughties cinematic growing pains.

Perhaps the best-known part of the *Superbad* mythos is that it was written by childhood friends Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, then aged just 13, the writers calling the characters Seth (Jonah Hill) and Evan (Michael Cera) because they couldn't think of any other names. Buss reveals other autobiographical elements of the script — a high-school dance gifted the film its infamous period-blood-stain-on-trousers gag — but notes that sometimes reality outstripped fiction. At a party surrounded by older dudes doing cocaine (a version of which is featured in the movie), Goldberg was bitten on the foot by a pig, the incident deemed too outrageous to be believable.

Party on, dudes: Evan, McLovin and Seth come of age.



When it comes to 'making of' dramas, the shoot of *Superbad* is hardly *Apocalypse Now* or *Mad Max: Fury Road*, yet Buss still finds some interesting angles. The film's protracted journey to the screen is told with a keen eye for trivia — actor David Krumholtz came up with the title while high; Jennifer Lawrence read for Emma Stone's Jules — and points to production problems perhaps unique to *Superbad*: due to US child-labour laws, a scene involving young Seth drawing numerous penises was subject to endless legal meetings. Ironically, the dick pics were eventually drawn by Goldberg's brother David — a lawyer. If you really want the ick, Mintz-Plasse's mother was on set watching her (underage) son perform his sex scene. Hopefully, the \$170 million gross (on

a \$20 million budget) offset the embarrassment.

Sometimes it feels as if Buss is stretching to justify *Superbad*'s significance — it says the cast went on to win two Oscars, without mentioning both were wins for Emma Stone — but to its credit, the book also investigates the film from a more enlightened 2025 perspective, questioning the sexism and unreconstructed dialogue. Buss also has fun counting the film's pop-cultural ripples. To wit, Eminem once rapped, "I'm more like Fogell, McLovin/McDonald's McMuffin." *Citizen Kane* can only dream. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT *I Am McLovin* might not be the most compelling behind-the-scenes yarn, but it's an exuberant, affectionately told tale, as salty and sweet as its source material.

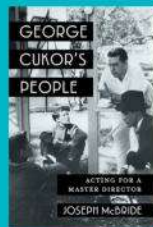


THE ART AND MAKING OF MICKEY 17

★★★★★

AUTHOR SIMON WARD

The "Making Of" part of this book about director Bong Joon Ho's eccentric new sci-fi *Mickey 17* is thorough and comprehensive, if a little prosaic — lots of block quotes from cast and crew, including Bong. The real gold is in the "Art" part: sketches, concept art, fun behind-the-scenes snaps, and drawings from Bong himself, including how they made the film's beloved alien 'creepers'. "My approach was: a moving croissant," he reveals. **JN**

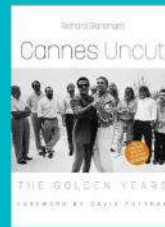


GEORGE CUKOR'S PEOPLE

★★★★★

AUTHOR JOSEPH McBRIDE

Film historian Joseph McBride examines the career of studio-system director George Cukor, filtered through his skill at working with Hollywood's finest (Hepburn, Tracy, Grant, Garland). There's great backstage juice here — discover why Cukor was fired from *Gone With The Wind* — but the book is at its best providing thoughtful insight and close analysis of some of the greatest performances ever committed to celluloid. **IF**

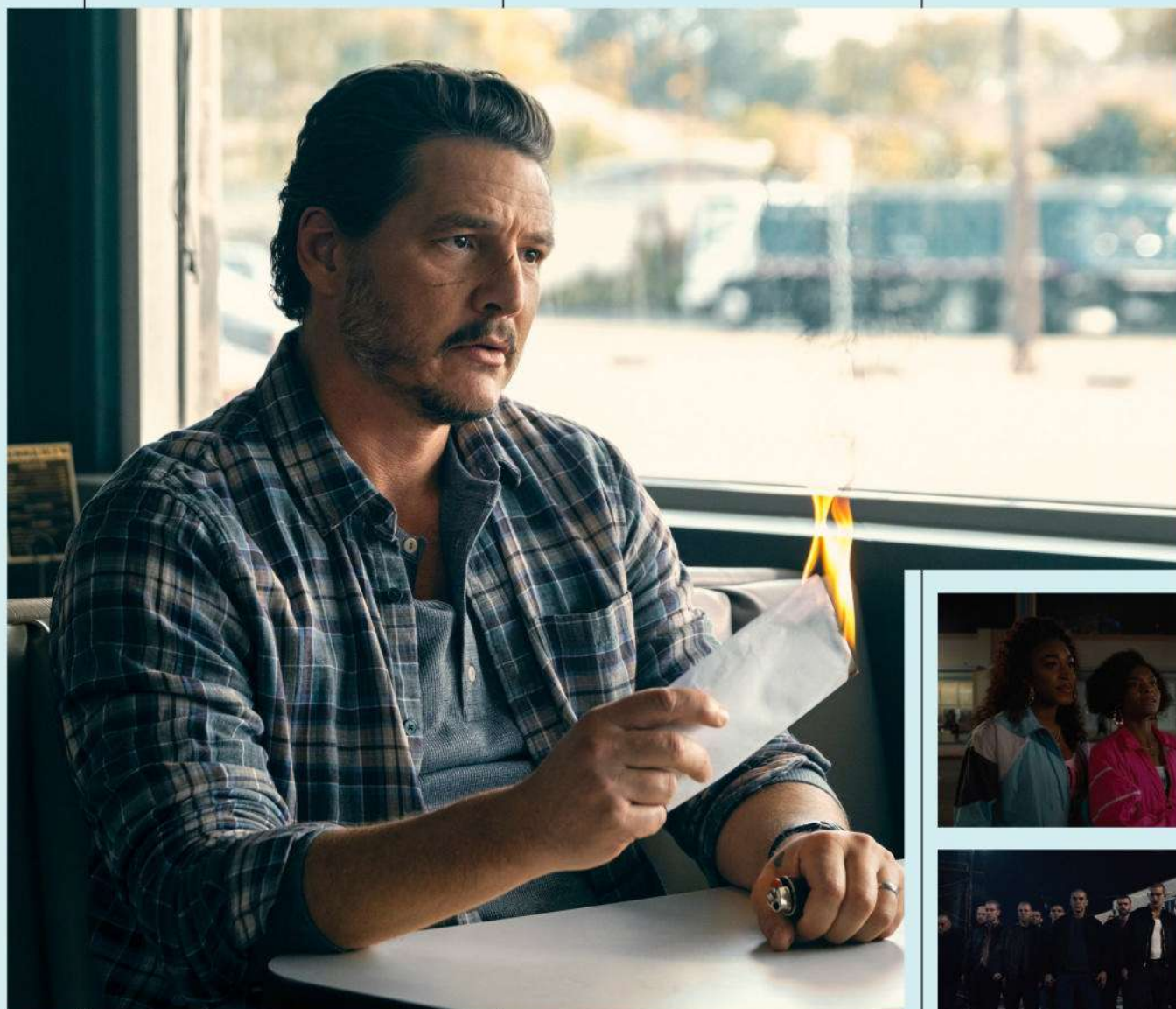


CANNES UNCUT

★★★★★

AUTHOR RICHARD BLANSHARD

This coffee-table photo-book is old-fashioned in a couple of senses. Showcasing the vast archive of photographer Richard Blanshard during his time at the Cannes Film Festival, it largely covers the 1970s to the '90s, with candid shots of stars like Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. Blanshard's approach is old-school, too: lots of expensive smiles in tuxedos. Nothing revelatory, then, but it's a handsome, glamorous tome. **JN**



Left: Pedro Pascal gets his freak on in Chapter 3. **Below, top to bottom:** Rappers Entice (Normani) and Barbie (Dominique Thorne); Skinheads assemble.

FILM

FREAKY TALES

BODEN AND FLECK'S ANTHOLOGY OF INTEREST

★★★

OUT 18 APRIL / CERT 15 / 107 MINS

DIRECTORS Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck

CAST Pedro Pascal, Jay Ellis, Ben Mendelsohn, Dominique Thorne, Normani, Tom Hanks

PLOT Across one night in 1987 in Oakland, California, interconnected tales of punks, basketball stars, assassins, neo-Nazis, and rising rappers unfold under a green glowing haze.

FROM ITS PULPY title, to its retro-computerised intro with Giorgio Moroder-style synths, to its opening voiceover ("Oakland in '87 was hella wild"), it's clear within seconds that *Freaky Tales* aims for culty midnight-movie status. On that front it largely succeeds, boasting a scrappy energy, outsider outlook, and local focus that feels like a sharp pivot from the slick universe-expansion of writer-directors Anna

Boden and Ryan Fleck's previous film, MCU behemoth *Captain Marvel*. As an anthology of stories inflected with supernatural flourishes — and occasional bursts of ultra-violence — the film's title proves apt: here lie four freaky tales, no more, no less.

As per most anthologies, some stories are better than others. The opening chapter — in which two loved-up punks (Jack Champion, Ji-young Joo) lead a fightback against a local gang of Nazi skinheads — is a blast, with rebellious use of scrawly animation that invades the screen. The fourth and final tale — in which real-life basketball star Sleepy Floyd (Jay Ellis) takes violent revenge on intruders seeking to swipe his Asian fine-art collection — is the schlockiest of the bunch, taking things out on a bloody bang. In-between, the story of rising rap duo Danger Zone (Dominique Thorne, Normani) finding their place on stage, and a third chapter in which a hitman (Pedro Pascal) struggles to evade his violent past, don't pack as much punch. Notably, they're the least freaky of the four; the freakier these tales, the more entertaining.

As with *Pulp Fiction*, the stories intersect and criss-cross with each other: two tales begin with different punters leaving the same screening of *The Lost Boys*; Ben Mendelsohn



crops up as nefarious force 'The Guy' in multiple chapters; all stories are catalysed by a blast of "cosmic green shit", an emerald lightning storm that empowers the fight-back against evil forces (a common theme throughout). If it's scattershot, that feels like the point: the aim here is to capture Oakland as the 11-year-old Fleck — who grew up in nearby Berkeley — would have remembered it, channelled into its own work of pulp fiction. Sleepy Floyd really did play for the Warriors, even if he didn't slice baddies with a samurai sword; rapper Too Short (after whose 1987 hit song the film is named) is fictionalised in Chapter 2, while his real counterpart narrates.

The result, overall, is relatively slight. But it's fun, inventive, just silly enough, and crowbars in Tom Hanks as a video-shop owner who hosts shady backroom poker games. This is a vibe as much as it is a movie — and that vibe is just about freaky enough. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT *Freaky Tales* never amounts to more than the sum of its parts — but those parts, while uneven, are always high-energy and entertaining.

GAMES

SPLIT FICTION

THE PAGEMASTER, BUT GOOD
(AND NO MACAULAY CULKIN)



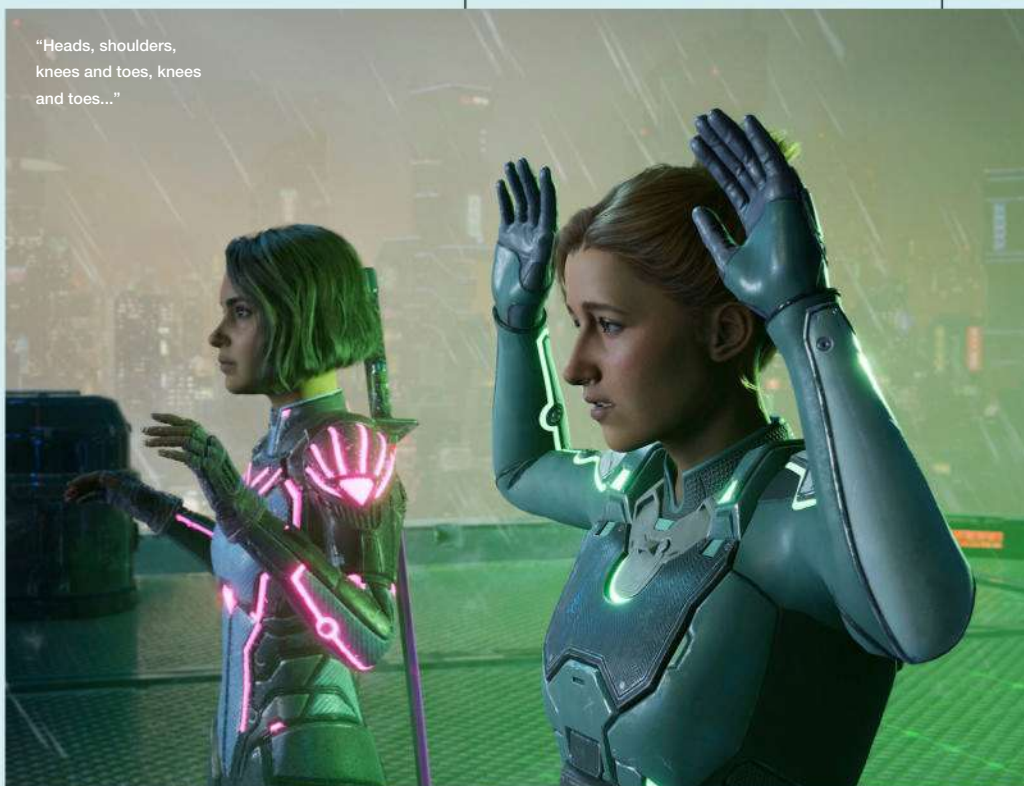
PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

WHEN STRUGGLING SCI-FI author Mio (voiced by Kaja Chan) and fantasy writer Zoe (Elsie Bennett) meet at Rader Publishing, they think they're on the cusp of getting book deals. Instead, they're roped into testing sketchy immersive simulations of their work — and Mio's attempt to escape traps them both in virtual worlds alternating between their respective genres. The real fantasy is any literary publisher having resources like that, so it's little surprise that Rader is actually a big-tech vulture stealing ideas directly from the minds of creators, all to soullessly churn into #content. In the age of AI slop we're currently trapped in, the metaphor feels quite pointed.

Like developer Hazelight Studios' previous outings, *A Way Out* and *It Takes Two*, *Split Fiction* is co-op only (local or online). Each level sees the leads hunting down glitches in the simulation in a bid to escape, pairing their individual abilities to progress. Despite an ever-shifting suite of skills, the story-hopping format works extremely well — bar the odd moment where it's slightly unclear who has to do what. Those instances are rare, though, and once you get through the extended intro sequence, which is perhaps a little too reluctant to give players control, the synergy between the two protagonists rarely disappoints.

Split Fiction is really about the power of creativity, using Mio and Zoe's quest to explore not only the possibilities of sci-fi and fantasy as narrative genres, but of video games as a medium. Core chapters brilliantly twist

"Heads, shoulders,
knees and toes, knees
and toes..."



expectations — Mio's 'Neon Revenge' evolves from a *Blade Runner*-tinged cyberpunk dystopia into a colourful action romp as cyber-ninjas ride zero-G bikes, while Zoe's 'Hopes Of Spring' tackles high fantasy, the pair shapeshifting into magical creatures to defeat an Ice King, via a dance-off with a funky monkey monarch.

Hidden side stories provide frantic bursts of even wilder experiences. Wandering a bucolic farmland as fart-powered pigs gives way to a darkly humorous commentary on meat production. A spy-fi heist shifts into a bullet-hell shootout against an *R-Type*-style boss. *Dune* fans are treated to beast-surfing through desert ruins, while an explosive game show makes *Squid Game* look tame. *Split Fiction* absolutely dazzles with its sheer inventiveness at every turn.

Mio and Zoe occasionally flirt with parody as the story overemphasises their contrasting personalities to underscore the two genres' deliberately contrasting tones. But with some solid character growth over the course of their adventures, backed up by strong voice performances by Chan and Bennett, it never feels trite. At its best, *Split Fiction* effortlessly charms, its myriad stories and gameplay tricks keeping things constantly fresh, with nothing outstaying its welcome. Like a great novel, you won't be able to put this down. **MATT KAMEN**

VERDICT An endlessly entertaining, regularly thrilling, and frequently hilarious adventure that fizzles with imagination, *Split Fiction* is one of the finest co-op games ever.



WHILE WAITING

★★★

PC, SWITCH

While Waiting begins with a bold gambit: "It might get boring sometimes," reads its opening title. The clue is in the name: this is a collection of mini-games in which you must simply wait for things. 'Patience Simulator', you could call it. There are some fun puzzles during the waiting, and the comic-style graphics are endearing. While it's undeniably gimmicky, the game's commitment to the — deliberately futile — bit is admirable. **JN**



LIKE A DRAGON: PIRATE YAKUZA IN HAWAII

★★★★

PC, PS4, PS5, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES X|S

The *Like A Dragon* franchise is well known for zany premises, but taking series mainstay Goro Majima from fierce *yakuza* to amnesiac pirate captain makes for the most gloriously unhinged outing yet. Bizarrely, it all works, balancing inherent silliness — think *Tokyo Drift*-ing an 18th-century galleon — with blistering melee combat, thrilling sea battles, and surprisingly emotional story beats. **MK**

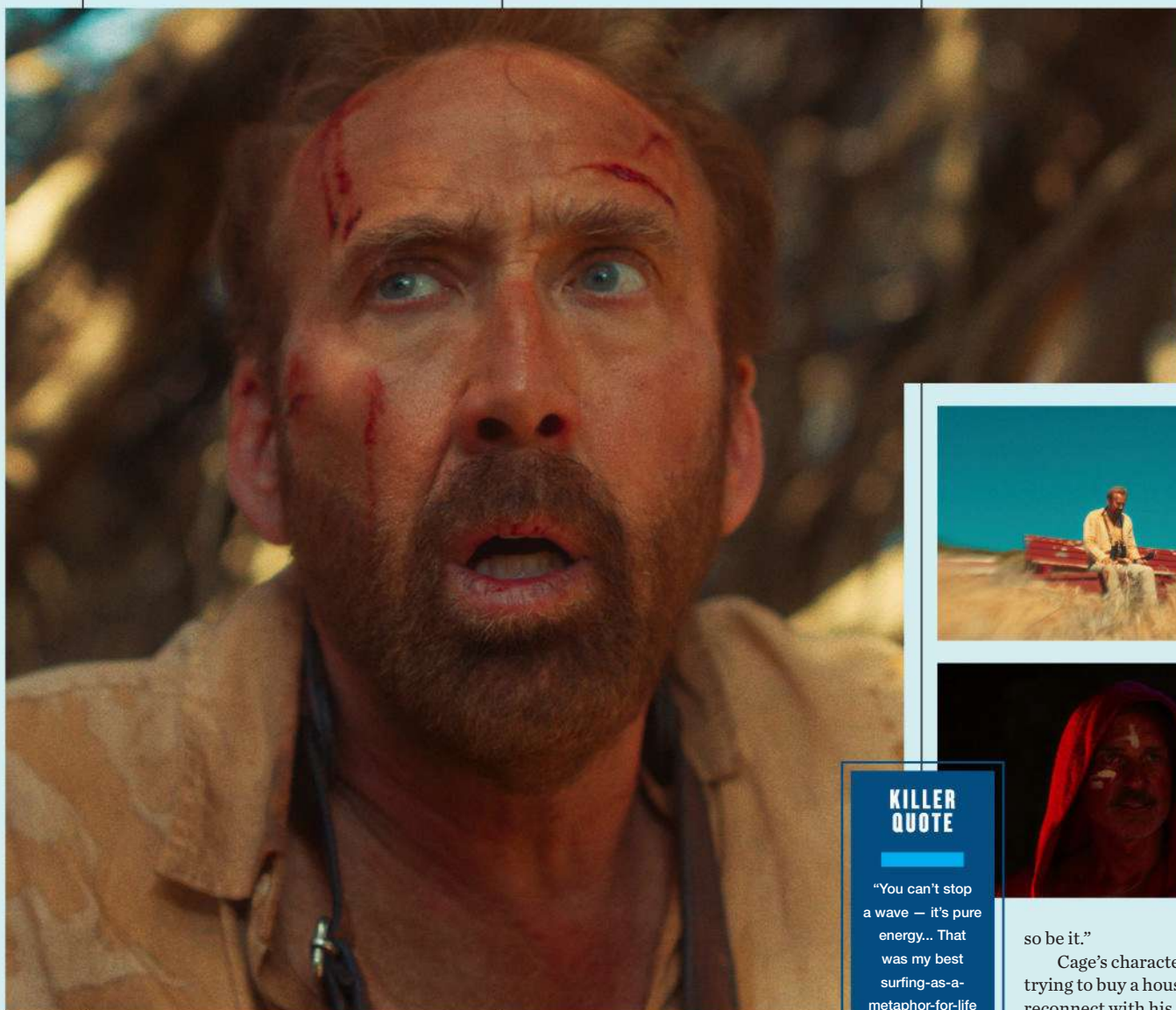


SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VII

★★★

MAC, PC, PS4, PS5, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES X|S

This seventh *Civilization* mixes things up for the long-running empire-building strategy series — but maybe not for the better. New era-shifting 'Ages' now force players to regularly swap which culture they're guiding, losing developed cities and military units in the process. It's balanced by great writing and automating duller features — like transport links — and it's the best-looking *Civ* yet, but history may not be kind to it. **KG**



Left: Wipeout!
Nicolas Cage
as *The Surfer*.
**Below, top
to bottom:**
Benched; Julian
McMahon's
Scully brings
the bad vibes.



KILLER QUOTE

"You can't stop
a wave — it's pure
energy... That
was my best
surfing-as-a-
metaphor-for-life
speech."

THE SURFER
(NICOLAS CAGE)

FILM

THE SURFER

NICOLAS CAGE CATCHES SOME
GNARLY WAVES, BRAH

★★★★★

OUT 9 MAY / CERT TBC / 99 MINS

DIRECTOR Lorcan Finnegan

CAST Nicolas Cage, Julian McMahon, Nic
Cassim, Miranda Tapsell, Alexander Bertrand,
Justin Rosniak, Rahel Romahn

PLOT A man (Cage) looking to buy a house in
a seaside community comes into increasingly
violent conflict with a territorial group of surfers.

WE NEVER LEARN the name of Nicolas Cage's character in *The Surfer*. (He is credited simply as 'The Surfer'.) It might, then, be tempting to think that this film — which features yet another Cage character slowly descending into madness — is simply an example of the 'Nicolas Cage Type', of 'Cage Rage', of the kind of uniquely bizarre freakout that has for years provided ample fodder for meme-merchants and

YouTube compilation editors.

But this is not quite the Cage of bees and bunnies in boxes. Instead it's a surreal, somewhat psychedelic riff on Hitchcockian suspense from Irish director Lorcan Finnegan, who has specialised in such material (2019's *Vivarium*, 2022's *Nocebo*), and in turn Cage seems to be channelling something closer to Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo*, or Michael Douglas in *Falling Down*: an ordinary but obsessive man, pushed to his limits.

The crazy here is coming from outside of Cage as much as within, and Finnegan's direction, along with Thomas Martin's script, nods to the neo-Hitchcock, too. There are echoes of British classics like *Straw Dogs*, *Eden Lake*, *Bait*, or Edward and Tubbs from *The League Of Gentlemen*: a story about a local beach for local people. Cage's character comes up against the least chill group of surfers this side of *Point Break*: obnoxious, wetsuited bullies, quick to violence, and hostile to outsiders.

The surfers are led by Scally (Julian McMahon), emerging as an Andrew Tate-esque men's-rights cult figure, their behaviour excused and accommodated by the effective *omertà* of their community. That includes one startling side character who waves it all away thusly: "If it stops them beating the Botox out of their wives,

so be it."

Cage's character — obsessively trying to buy a house he can't afford, reconnect with his family, and just catch a break, figurative and literal — is infuriated. Incrementally and exponentially, he begins to lose the plot, the gaslighting sending him towards something resembling a psychotic episode, inviting us, the audience, to question reality, too. Though the temptation might have been to go even more extreme, his performance is perfectly pitched, responding to the tyranny of his foes — and the relentless Australian sun — with a hazy confusion. For such an unhinged role, he is remarkably understated. (He does slurp beer from a car-park puddle and stuff a rat in his pocket, but that's relatively tame for this guy.)

That sense of disorientation is compounded by Finnegan's filming style, summoning a similar sense of hyperreal unhingery via wide-angle-lens close-ups, oversaturated cinematography, and the jazzy intrigue of François Tétaz's score. The screen shimmers and ripples with tension and heat. While the ending feels a little scappily assembled, this for the most part delivers precisely tuned psychological thrills. It's the cinematic equivalent of getting sunstroke. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT With a committed, crazed, brilliantly calibrated performance from late-Renaissance Cage, this is a feverishly good thriller: surreal and strange and sticky.

There'd been
a disastrous mishap
with the superglue.



FILM

THE RETURN

A NEW TAKE ON THE CLASSICS
THAT'S NOT QUITE A CLASSIC

★★★

OUT 11 APRIL / CERT 15 / 116 MINS

DIRECTOR Uberto Pasolini

CAST Ralph Fiennes, Juliette Binoche, Charlie Plummer, Marwan Kenzari, Claudio Santamaria

PLOT Ten years after *Troy's* fall, Odysseus (Fiennes) finally reaches his home Ithaca, where suitors are pressuring his wife Penelope (Binoche) to remarry.

WHILE WE WAIT to see Homer's *Odyssey* as a big-budget Christopher Nolan blockbuster, Italian producer-director Uberto Pasolini brings us the low-budget, character-piece version. Rather than trying to mount a vast, effects-packed naval adventure featuring gods and monsters, Pasolini sticks to location-based *terra firma*, and focuses his narrative on the grizzled protagonist's homecoming.

The Return opens with Odysseus (Ralph

Fiennes) washing up on a beach, and relies on good old-fashioned dialogue and performance to do the dramatic heavy lifting. There's no reference to Odysseus' adventures since leaving Troy — no recounted tales of sirens, the cyclops, or divine meddling. Here, we're on the human level of psychology and emotion, making this a thoroughly modern, if relatively mundane, interpretation.

On one side of the story we have Juliette Binoche as Penelope, Queen of Ithaca, wrestling with a kind of grief as she refuses to accept her husband's presumed death and puts off increasingly threatening demands to choose a new spouse. Her scenes are mostly interior, thick with shadow, as she drifts mournfully around her household, witnessing its moral disintegration while toxic masculinity takes hold and her son Telemachus (Charlie Plummer) becomes a target. There's an inherent repetitiveness to the Penelope strand, given its rhythmic attention to the shroud she's weaving — and, by night, unpicking, to delay its completion (which she's previously promised will mark the moment of her new-husband selection). But while it slows the pace, this feels appropriate; it conveys a sense of a life wilfully held in stasis.

Meanwhile, the film's other half concerns Odysseus: bronzed, scarred and scraggly

hirsute. He stalks the island as a beggar, torn between PTSD-driven shame at his Trojan war crimes (where others marvel at his big-horse wheeze, his mind is mired in the slaughter that followed) and his sense of responsibility to family and kingdom, both equally jeopardised by his long absence. Fiennes is unsettlingly compelling as the broken hero, suggesting echoes of Clint Eastwood's similarly mythic gunslinger in *Unforgiven*: a man whose inability to escape his violent past makes for a very bloody present.

This pays off when he and Binoche (in their third collab, following *Wuthering Heights* and *The English Patient*) come together for the bow-and-axes finale, and Odysseus fully lets rip. Though the tone here is by no means triumphal — *The Return* is far too thoughtful to pitch its hacks and slashes as entertainment. So, while Pasolini's film lacks visual flair and is sadly hampered by some stilted supporting performances, it is at least a refreshingly grown-up and grounded take on swords and sandals. **DAN JOLIN**

VERDICT Aka 'The Odyssey: The Bits Without The Monsters'. Not that that should put you off, as Binoche and Fiennes bring some raw, fleshy humanity to this mythic text, giving it a modern twist that balances the film's flaws.

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Here: "I want to be your sledgehammer." Below: Hard man in a hard hat.

FILM

A WORKING MAN

P45s ALL ROUND



OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 116 MINS

DIRECTOR David Ayer

CAST Jason Statham, Michael Peña, David Harbour, Noemí González, Jason Flemyng

PLOT When his friend's daughter is kidnapped, ex-Royal Marine Levon Cade (Statham) hunts down the kidnappers — soon embroiling himself in Chicago's ugly criminal underground.

A WORKING MAN may be the Jason Statham-iest film ever to Stath. With its man-on-a-mission, hunt-for-a-kidnapped-girl narrative, it borrows wholeheartedly from the likes of *Commando* and *Taken*, and effectively steals from *John Wick* in the "weapons sommelier" played by David Harbour. But this is first and foremost a Jason Statham film, boiled down to its essential ingredients — losing all flavour and substance in the process.

Statham ostensibly plays a character called Levon Cade, but in a very real, more accurate sense, he plays a character called 'Jason Statham': a tough guy with a mysterious military past and an unplaceable Essex-by-way-of-Beverly-Hills accent who dispatches a succession of forgettable goons in order to save the day. It is exactly the same type found in all his recent roles, often in films with similar job-title titles: *The Mechanic*, *The Transporter*, *The Beekeeper*.

The last — which featured the appalling line, "To bee or not to bee!" — was directed by David Ayer, who returns here for *A Working Man*. Ayer has co-written the script with Statham's fellow Expendable, Sylvester Stallone, adapting the novel *Levon's Trade* by Chuck Dixon. But despite all the talent and experience behind it, there is so much here that seems careless or ill-thought-out, from the ugly human-trafficking plot to the atrocious dialogue. ("Violence follows you like



a cloud," one character haughtily tells Cade. Does that even work as a simile? Do clouds follow?)

Statham at least looks the business: strong, implacable, his perfectly maintained stubble never in doubt, his angular physique as rigid as it's ever been. Now 57, he is not as agile as he used to be, but he still convinces. Yet the action here is utterly flat, Cade's much-trumpeted skillset as an ex-Royal Marine never compelling. His best move is to intimidate a bad guy by overpouring maple syrup on his pancakes. Otherwise he seems contractually immune to gunshots, never in jeopardy, never any danger of actual drama or tension. It's witless, suspense-free, tedious.

Shockingly inept editing doesn't help: frantic cutting never lets the fight choreography breathe, and structurally many scenes do not flow into one another, while plot threads — Statham visits lawyers about custody of his child, only for the film to entirely forget about that — are discarded.

All of which might just be forgivable if there were something else to cling onto. Where are the characters to actually care about? Where are the slick, acrobatic stunts? Where are the cool one-liners? Statham's response to a villain promising to cut his heart out is to simply respond, "Good luck!" *Good luck?* That's it? Is that all you've got? Where is the Statham who might have offered, as he once did, "I now pronounce you man and knife"? Or, "I'm immune to 179 different types of poison"? Where is even the slightest sense of fun? Don't we come to these films to have a good time? What are we even doing here? **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT Like a parody of a Jason Statham film, without any of the joy that might imply. This *Working Man* just doesn't work.

also out

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REVIEWS IN FULL



DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN

★★★★ TV

"The bread-and-butter of *Daredevil* is its action sequences. Any worries that the move from Netflix to Disney+ would mean the show is less violent quickly prove unfounded. The fights are just as bone-breakingly brutal and bloody as we've come to expect." **AMON WARMANN**

DAY OF THE FIGHT

★★★ FILM

"The screenplay is littered with stock situations and New York stereotypes, but Jack Huston the writer is well served by Jack Huston the filmmaker. The film is shot in monochrome that does much to evoke a power that probably wasn't present on the page." **IAN FREER**

MARCHING POWDER

★★ FILM

"Danny Dyer is a talented guy, and he really delivers what he's given to work with, but his character shows little empathy for anyone beyond his family and friends. So it's a big ask to demand that an audience have much affection for him." **HELEN O'HARA**

THE WHEEL OF TIME: SEASON 3

★★★★ TV

"More sophisticated than *The Witcher*, more thrilling than *The Rings Of Power*, and more distinctive than *House Of The Dragon*, it's hard to imagine a better version of Robert Jordan's epic book saga." **DAVID OPIE**

O'DESSA

★★ FILM

"Rather than rock 'n' roll glory, this musical dystopia is destined for cult-album status. It's the sort of head-scratcher you stumble upon at midnight, and either switch off or find yourself strangely enraptured by." **BEN TRAVIS**

KODAK TRI X PAN FILM



21

→ 22

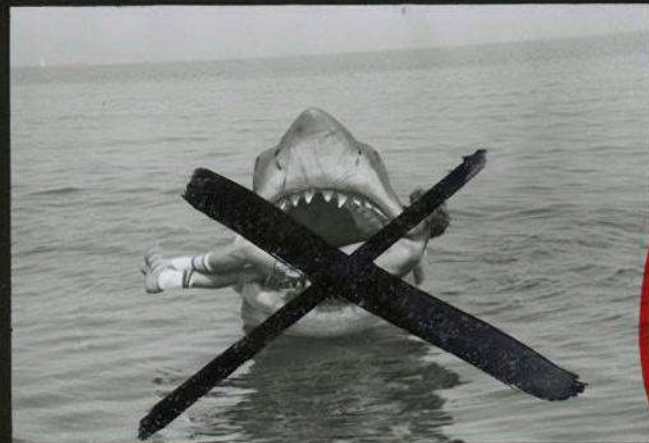
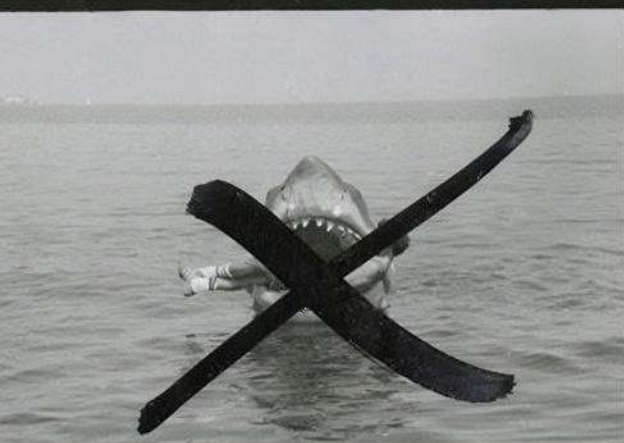
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SHARK

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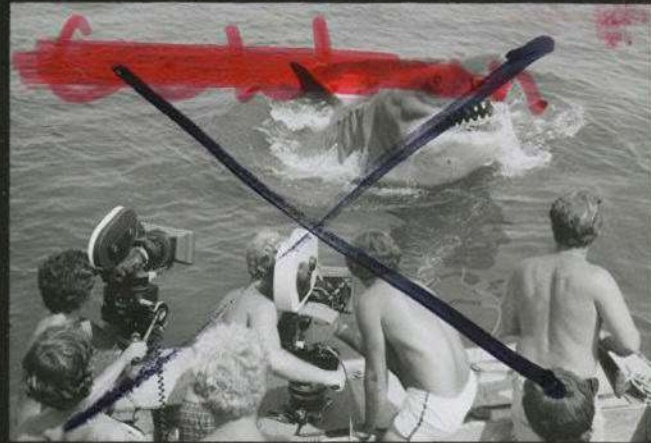
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50 YEARS OF JAWS

KODAK SAFETY FILM



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T A I L E

AS STEVEN SPIELBERG'S **JAWS**

HITS HALF A CENTURY, WE BOW

DOWN TO ONE OF THE GREATEST

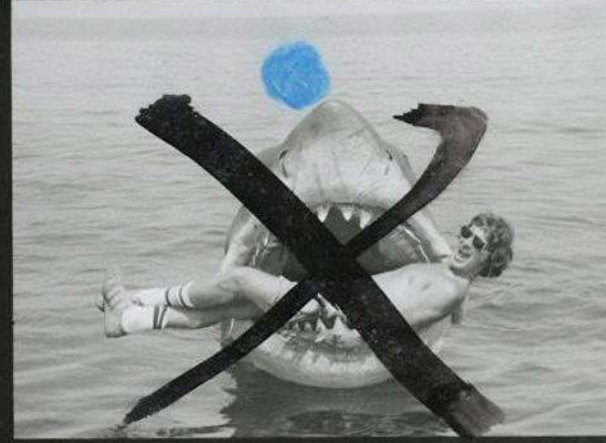
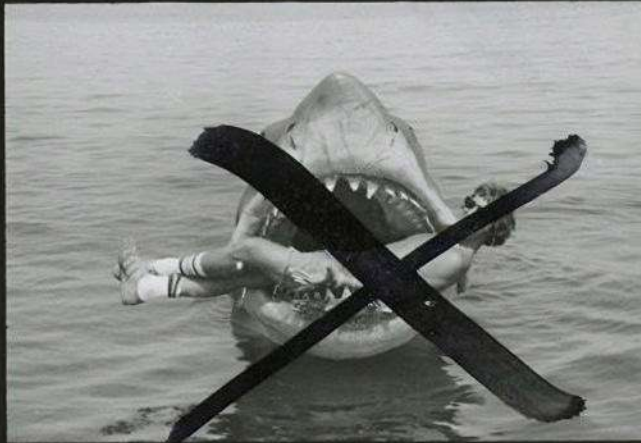
FILMS OF ALL TIME, RALLYING

HOLLYWOOD SUPERFANS TO

DISSECT THE HEAD, THE TAIL,

THE WHOLE DAMN THING...

KODAK SAFETY FILM



MPTV

→ 29A

→ 30

→ 30A

→ 31

THE SOURCE

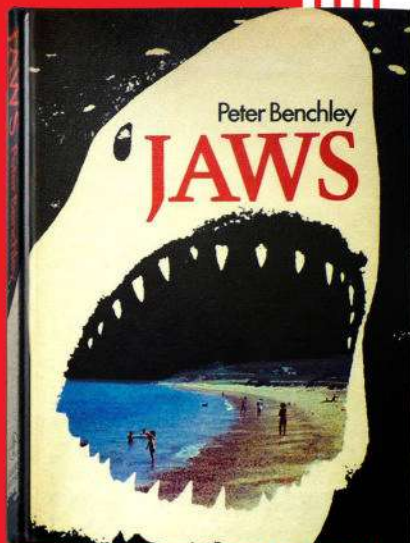
HOW A TINY NEWSPAPER STORY INSPIRED A CINEMATIC BEHEMOTH

DURING THE SUMMER of 1964, Long Island fisherman and Quint-a-like Frank Mundus harpooned a giant great white shark weighing an estimated 4,500 lbs. Having read about the catch in a small newspaper item in New York's *Daily News*, writer Peter Benchley, who had enjoyed childhood shark-fishing expeditions in Nantucket with his father and brother, pondered on the story, imagining if such an apex predator preyed on a beach and just wouldn't leave. By June '71, Benchley, then an associate editor at *Newsweek*, had pitched the novel to publishers Doubleday, earning a \$7,500 advance.

With Benchley having considered pretentious titles including 'The Stillness In The Water' and 'Leviathan Rising' before landing on the snappier *Jaws*, in 1973 the book provoked a feeding frenzy for the paperback rights that went for a monumental \$575,000. At this point, *Jaws* came on the radar of producers Richard Zanuck and David Brown. Steven Spielberg, working with the producing pair on his big-screen debut *The Sugarland Express*, saw the galley proofs on Richard Zanuck's desk, stole them and suggested, "I can make something of this. It will be fun." By the 159th day of shooting, he might have revised that opinion downward.

Howard Sackler and Carl Gottlieb's screenplay kept the high concept but stripped out some of the book's more unappealing elements. The opening attack on Chrissie was tweaked to have less of the horror vibe of a woman being punished for being sexually promiscuous. In what Spielberg felt was pure soap opera, the novel had Brody and Ellen's marriage on the rocks, exacerbated by the latter's affair with Hooper, here presented as an immature Ivy League graduate. Even more dramatically, Mayor Vaughan keeps the beaches open because he is in huge debt to the Mob. In the book, the shark dies (undramatically) from sustained harpoon wounds. But Spielberg, he told Benchley, thought that was "a bit of a downer". The author thought no audience would swallow the film's death-by-compressed-air-cannister finale.

Post-*Jaws*, Benchley, who cameos as a TV reporter, later regretted the bad rep his highly successful handiwork meted out to sharks, becoming an environmental activist and advocate for the preservation of the species. Benchley also rued a war of words with Spielberg during the shoot. "Wait and see," he told the *Los Angeles Times*, "Spielberg will one day be known as the greatest second-unit director in Hollywood." He later walked back the remark as "particularly unfortunate". The two men subsequently buried the hatchet. Probably in sand. **IAN FREER**



Author Peter
Benchley.

THE

JURASSIC PARK SCREENWRITER DAVID KOEPP BREAKS DOWN JAWS' SENSATIONAL SCRIPT

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

JAWS IS, OF COURSE, a Steven Spielberg movie adapted from a bestselling book about an animal running (well, swimming) amok and eating humans. So, when it comes to appraising the film's screenplay, credited to Peter Benchley and Carl Gottlieb, there is only one choice: David Koepp, the screenwriter of *Jurassic Park* and therefore a man who knows what it takes to write a Steven Spielberg movie adapted from a bestselling book about animals running amok and eating humans. "It's a superb script," says Koepp. "It's a miracle of structure, of character, of suspense. What's most surprising about it is the way it was written. It's not the way a screenplay should ever be written. But there's the occasional exception — *Jaws* being one of them, *Tootsie* being another — where the process of crafting the screenplay is utterly chaotic. And the end result is perfect."

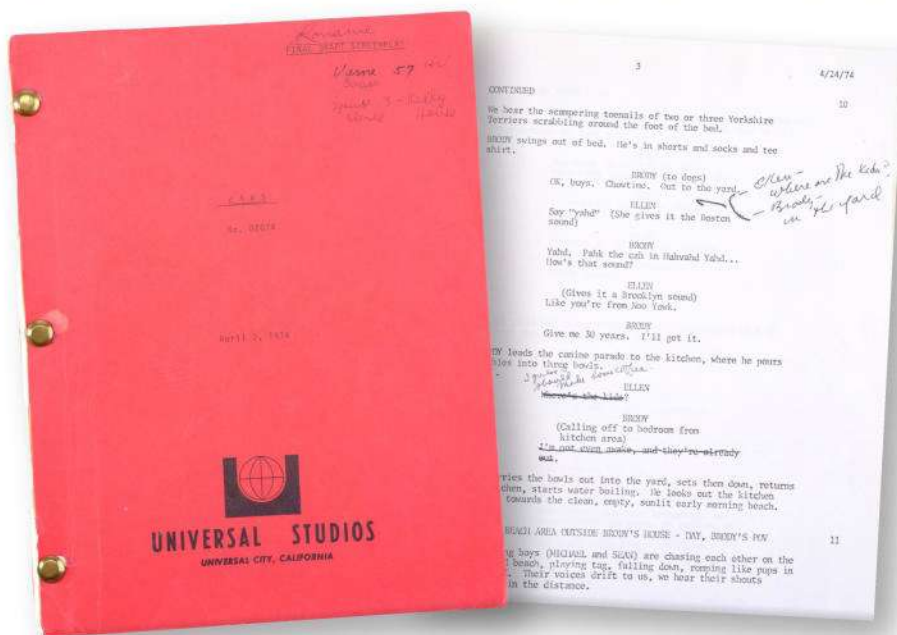
Out of all that chaos came a clean approach that appeals to Koepp: "It's a classic three-act structure." He notes, though, that the third act is unusual in itself. First, it takes up most of the film's final hour. Second, it can itself be broken down into three acts. "That, too, has a beginning and a middle and an end. It's, 'Set to sea with high hopes and certain expectations, have them completely upended, when they realise how big the shark is and how outmatched they are.' And then the biggest climax of all is, 'It's in control, we're not.'"

Koepp hasn't read Peter Benchley's novel, so was unaware of the subplot where Matt Hooper sleeps with Ellen Brody, or indeed that Hooper is killed by the shark. "Those sound like the sort of choices you need to make when you adapt a novel," muses Koepp. "With *Jurassic Park*, the novel's a bit darker than the film. The Richard Attenborough character [John Hammond] dies in the book, eaten by his creations. And it just seemed like a downer. We kinda like this guy; can't he just learn his lesson? And that sounds like a similar choice. You don't need an affair. You have a great white shark. That's a lot to work with."

The focus of *Jaws* isn't on the shark, though: it's on the characters. And in Brody, Quint and Hooper, Gottlieb, Spielberg and the actors created three iconic characters. "Having written some fantastical premises, it's very hard to get believable human characters in them," says Koepp. "I'm deeply envious of all the scenes with the three guys together. They're just fantastic, and there's never a silly moment. A sheriff from New York, who's afraid of the water. The marine specialist. The guy who was on the Indianapolis. How much better does that get?"

Koepp has written a speech or two in his time. But he acknowledges that the Indianapolis monologue — no matter the truth of who

SCREENPLAY



Main: Storyboard for the climactic scene where Brody faces off against the shark. **Left:** A page from the original *Jaws* screenplay, annotated by Lorraine Gary, aka Ellen Brody.

actually wrote it — is one he deeply admires. “It’s a bold choice, a very bold choice,” he says. “A character stopping to tell a long story that’s deeply revealing of them well into the movie? I think that’s great. I did it in a thing that never got made.” He pauses, arches an eyebrow, anticipates *Empire*’s reply, heads it off at the pass. “But it had nothing to do with that speech!”

Koepp has written a *Mission: Impossible*, a *Spider-Man*, a couple of *Jurassics*. But he’s a smart guy. Smart enough to know that he would never tackle a remake of *Jaws*. “I’d feel terrible for anyone who had to,” he laughs. “You can’t come close to it. There have been other very good ocean-adventure movies. Just don’t try and do *that* one.”



LEIGH WHANNELL FIRST saw *Jaws* as a child. Transfixed by the cover in the Betamax section of a video store, he'd initiated a weeks-long campaign to convince his parents to allow him to see it, and when they finally caved it was, he says, "instant love, instant obsession". He watched it weekly for a year and "just never stopped", inspired for life, going on to direct his own genre — and monster — hits (including *Upgrade*, *The Invisible Man* and *Wolf Man*). Who better, then, to talk us through Spielberg's enduring handiwork. Via Zoom, Whannell showed us office shelves lined with his own films' memorabilia (*Saw*'s Jigsaw features heavily), but also laden with models of the Orca, *Jaws* books and a shark with a hinged jaw halfway through swallowing Quint. He's gonna need a bigger office.

What set *Jaws* apart for you?

There's a couple of things. One is that no-one had made that movie yet. Sharks have captured the human imagination, they're such a primal human fear. In the water, we are literally and figuratively out of our element, so eventually someone was going to make a shark movie. But imagine how many bad movies of *Jaws* could have been made. The shark is a beautiful practical effect, maybe the best practical effect ever. But I can imagine a badly directed, over-lit, rubbery shark. That was another stroke of luck: they got the

right guy. *Jaws* is a B-movie made with A-level craft. It had no right to be that good.

Why were practical effects so important?

That's what makes the film so brilliant, so real. If it was made today, the shark would be CGI, and I would instantly detach. In *Jaws*, you can see that shark cruising through the water. One thing Spielberg did that was extra genius was to shoot on the open ocean. The producers tried to convince him to use a tank on the MGM lot or something, but because he was young and naive, he insisted [on the sea], thereby ensuring that their movie was a forever classic.

Do you have a favourite shot?

So many! I think my favourite is an overhead shot, when they've just sighted the shark and we watch it cruise past the boat, and you see the size of it. But there are so many. I think he was like, "I'm going to make this a demonstration of what I can do." When the Mayor, Brody and Hooper are talking about the shark in front of that billboard, that could easily have just been shot with standard coverage. Cut to the mayor. Cut back to medium close-up. But [Spielberg] composes it in this one big shot where they keep





walking in and out of their own close-ups. That takes a lot of choreography.

Did the USS Indianapolis scene always stick out for you?

Oh yeah. *Jaws* would have been fine without that scene. No-one would have walked out and gone, “You know what? It was missing a big speech.” Only Spielberg can turn a scene like that into a classic. It’s so beautifully performed, but *Jaws* is one of those movies where things don’t work [just] because of one element. You have an amazing performance by a great actor. The dialogue is great. A lot of speeches that give a character’s backstory seem forced or ham-fisted, even in good movies; it’s the movie reaching for your sympathies too much. This speech is very matter-of-fact; it endures. The camerawork is beautiful. He holds on that close-up with barely any cutaways. And the music is so eerie, that John Williams low string. So it’s every element working in sync. When Robert Shaw’s talking, you’re picturing what he’s describing. The wall between an audience and the movie collapses.

For *The Invisible Man*, you talked about weaponising empty space and making us

distrust it. Similarly in *Jaws*, if Spielberg is showing us the ocean, you worry why.

When I came up with that idea for *The Invisible Man*, I remember being excited because it reminded me of *Jaws*. I said to the cinematographer, Stefan Duscio, “If we do our jobs correctly, we’re going to do for empty rooms what *Jaws* did for the water.”

The Invisible Man also has an all-time great shock. There’s an art, isn’t there, to choosing and placing your scares in a thriller like this?

If a horror movie is relentlessly bashing you over the head with jump scares, it has diminishing returns. For me, you should only deploy a jump scare when you can really rip people’s heads off. *Jaws* was made in a time before jump scares were ubiquitous, but it’s calibrated perfectly. It’s like a symphony. It has its peaks, and the rhythms just seem so natural. But that’s no accident. [Spielberg] worked to give the film that beautiful rhythm. It’s a masterclass in tension and drama.

What lessons does *Jaws* have for directors?

The main lesson for me is to make sure that your characters are not secondary to some

Clockwise from top left: Filming Roy Scheider as Chief Brody in the sea; Brody in action; Dental check-up; Ruuuuuuunt!; Spielberg and co. in the shallows; Quint’s (Robert Shaw) demise.

monster. The characters need to feel real. I just love those three; they’re iconic and so distinct.

Famously, everything went wrong on the water, but Spielberg would come up with bits of business to shoot and keep busy. Can you feel that balance of planning and improvisation?

Movies are sorcery, not mathematics. There’s so many things going wrong. You’re losing the light. The props don’t work. The actor doesn’t like their jacket. You’re juggling chainsaws and kittens at all times. I think that Spielberg is one of, if not the, most talented director to ever live, and yet I feel like *Jaws*’ success is an accident. He was plagued by all these problems. The shark didn’t work. He was probably a nervous wreck. But it somehow tumbled out of the dryer as a masterpiece. If Spielberg was being honest, my guess is he’d say, “I don’t know how I did it.” But every movie is just a crazy accident and I’m just thankful that he kept pushing, because now we have *Jaws*.



SIMON PEGG SALUTES ROY SCHEIDER'S MARTIN BRODY, THE THINKING MAN'S EVERYMAN

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

ROBERT SHAW'S AGENT might have begged to differ, negotiating so Shaw's name came slightly higher in the opening credits, but there's never been any doubt about the true hero of *Jaws*. Roy Scheider's Martin Brody not only has more screen time than Shaw's Quint and Richard Dreyfuss' Hooper, he is the heart of *Jaws*. The soul of *Jaws*. Don't take our word for it. Ask Simon Pegg, a man who knows a thing or two about creating enduring screen heroes. "When you're a kid, Hooper is your favourite," he says. "But when you become a parent, you start to drift towards Brody. You start to understand what's at stake." Here, Pegg talks us through key Brody moments.

THE DINNER TABLE

"Scheider is so great," says Pegg. "He looks tough, like a boxer. But he's incredibly sensitive. That little moment when he still has time to show his son love and affection, even though he

has the weight of the world on his shoulders, Scheider plays that beautifully. He's very much in love with his wife and his kids. It makes him a real everyman, not a Superman. He's not a supercop."

THE DOLLY ZOOM

Spielberg didn't invent the dolly zoom, the technique where a camera simultaneously zooms in or out while pushing in or pulling back on a dolly, creating a feeling of disorientation. But he perfected it with the shot focused on Brody, the sheriff realising that the shark has dropped in for lunch on the crowded beach on the Fourth Of July. "It's the biggest 'Oh fuck' in cinema history," says Pegg. "It's such an internal moment. When you use those kinds of lenses, [it can be] quite intimate. You're in his head at that moment. It's beautifully done. You can feel the fear creeping through him."

A BIGGER BOAT

Brody is the first to see the shark up close and personal, when it gets too chummy during a

chumming session aboard the Orca. And Scheider's startled reaction culminates in the deadpan delivery of one of the great lines: "You're gonna need a bigger boat." "It's another banner moment," notes Pegg. "He's sort of rigid with fear, neck straight, back straight. He plays it brilliantly. It's almost like he's seen a big spider, the way he reacts."

THE SCAR-SHARING

"That's one of the most joyful scenes in the movie, and one of the most powerful character-led scenes," says Pegg of the Orca-set scene where Quint and Hooper set aside their enmity to bond over their mutual scars. Interestingly, Brody is very much an outsider during the scene, briefly considering showing off an almost certainly deeply unimpressive scar, only to not bother. "There's a moment where he's relieved that the tension between Hooper and Quint is dissipating," adds Pegg. "It's like he's looking at his two kids, who finally made up after a massive fight."



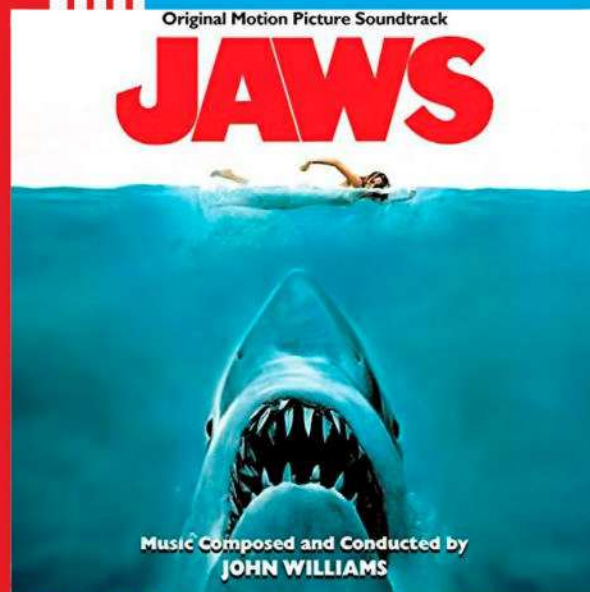
Main: Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) is on the lookout as the Orca sinks. **Below:** Scheider talks to Spielberg between takes. **Bottom right:** Legendary composer John Williams.



SMILE, YOU SON OF A BITCH

With Quint dead, Hooper missing, presumed dead, and the Orca fast sinking, it's up to Brody to save the day, shooting a gas canister that's become lodged in the shark's mouth. "Smile, you son of a bitch!" he snarls, firing the final shot before dissolving into fits of hysterical laughter as fishy blood and guts rain down from on high. "In any other movie that line would be cheesy," notes Pegg. "But this film has earned it. Brody has earned that moment. It's euphoric when it happens. But even when I was little, I thought, 'Sharks can smell blood from a mile away? Isn't every goddamn shark in the vicinity gonna come for them?'" They're gonna need some bigger boats.

Getty Images, Universal



THE SCORE

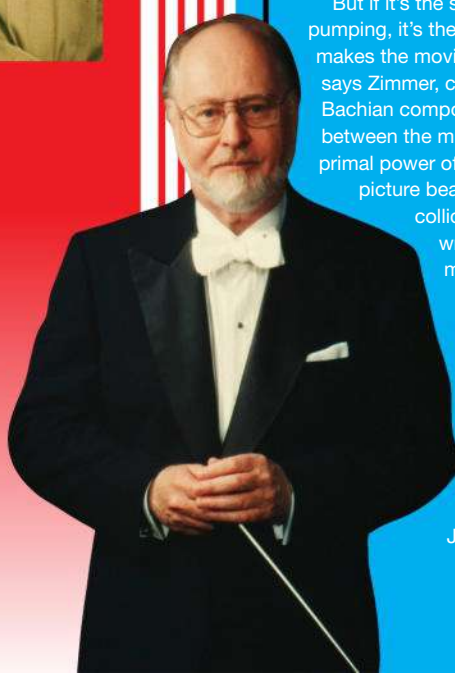
HANS ZIMMER EXALTS THE GENIUS OF JOHN WILLIAMS

THOUGH THE MECHANICAL shark on the set of *Jaws* often refused to function, John Williams conjured a theme for it that worked like gangbusters. And while the primordial *dun-duns* he landed on to signal the great white's presence may be so simple that Spielberg assumed his maestro was having a laugh when he first heard them, the genius driving *Jaws*' score is no joke.

Take *that* main theme, a bassy, two-note tuba *ostinato* rooted in the stabs of Bernard Herrmann's *Psycho* and the orchestral drama of Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite*. What strange alchemy allows this basic semitone to give *Jaws*' shark such power? "What you have to understand is, because these two notes, E and F, are so close together, they sort of clash," explains fêted composer — and John Williams superfan — Hans Zimmer, speaking to *Empire* over Zoom as he plays Williams' theme on his synthesiser. "You don't know what key you're in. You don't know where the shark is. Is he here? (*Plays an E*) Is he there? (*Plays an F*) Are you an E? Or an F? You know, Williams and Spielberg describe the shark as this relentless machine, and in the rhythm of the theme there's this wonderful sense of the pistons of a machine going."

But if it's the simplicity of *Jaws*' theme that gets the blood pumping, it's the Oscar-winning suite Williams builds around it that makes the movie soar. "It's an extraordinary orchestral adventure," says Zimmer, citing Williams' 'Shark Cage Fugue', an almost Bachian composition that sees him tee up the battle of wills between the minds of Hooper, Brody, and Quint and the sheer primal power of the shark, as a particular highpoint. "It serves the picture beautifully. It's man versus machine, it's two subjects colliding, and it's what I adore about John. He always writes something of great quality. He makes the film more sophisticated."

For Zimmer, there's no question that Williams' score ranks among the legendary composer's all-time classics. "We're still talking about it 50 years later, so it's timeless," he enthuses. "And it does this beautiful thing — which I love — which is it actually exists outside the film. You don't need to have the images playing. You don't need to have the film playing. You can just listen to it as a concert piece, and it works." Job done, JW. **JORDAN KING**





THE SHARK

SPECIAL-EFFECTS VETERAN SHANE MAHAN DISSECTS *JAWS*' SON OF A BEACH

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

FOR ONE OF cinema's most iconic beasts, *Jaws*' marquee monster has gotten a lot of bad press. Legend has cemented the three remote-controlled 'hero' sharks — designed by Joe Alves and built by Bob Matthey — as malfunctioning, migraine-inducing nightmares which almost sunk the entire production. Well, Legacy Effects' Shane Mahan, who has worked on otherworldly beings for everything from the first two *Terminator* films to *Aliens*, *Jurassic Park* and *The Shape Of Water*, has something to say about that. "Let me tell you, I defy anybody to make a 25-foot mechanical shark that actually has to work in the ocean," he states. "Just go ahead and try, then come back to me in six months and tell me how you did. Because that was a Herculean task, to figure out how to make an artificial and quite spectacular shark

function underwater. And those shots really look great."

A self-professed "strange boy" who pored over issues of *Famous Monsters Of Filmland*, at the age of nine Mahan thrilled to *Jaws*' jump-scares. "I loved screaming and pulling my feet off the floor, thinking something was going to bite my legs off. I knew it was artificial — I didn't think anyone would throw Robert Shaw into the jaws of a huge shark and have him spit blood — but I thought it was fantastic."

Those moments stayed with him as he built his career as a special-effects technician, even getting to work with Steven Spielberg himself on the first two *Jurassic Parks*. "We all grew up watching *Jaws*, and now here we were, kind of making a modern version of *Jaws*. One time when we were doing *Jurassic 2*, where someone is pulled into a cave by a T-Rex and blood comes down in a waterfall, I did turn to Steven and say,

"This is equally as impressive as when the head pops out of the fishing boat."

And, of course, as a creature designer Mahan has given much thought to why the shark works so well. With its black, soulless eyes, it has the unsettling stare of a Terminator: "There's an expression to it that is uncaring." With its ability to lunge at you from any direction, it has the invisibility factor of the Predator: "They're so well camouflaged. The evolution of the white belly and the grey top is remarkable — you just can't win against the shark if you're by yourself." And then, of course, there are the titular chompers. "The fact that their teeth are constantly revolving and changing, as [old ones] drop out, new ones come in, I mean, that is something that is amazing," he says. "That fish is designed to do one thing and one thing only: to clean the ocean of dead whales and dumb little boys who



swim out too far. That's just the way it is."

Mahan knows as well as anyone how hard it is to create mechanical effects instead of going full CG. Yet he still yearns for more films like *Jaws* that dare to also do things the hard way. "I wish they would. How about that? I wish they would," Mahan says. "Just because the craft of shooting footage and slugging it out with the elements is, to me, more satisfying than seeing a lot of composite shots that I know aren't really there. Not to take away from other types of film. But just psychologically I can tell the difference." When it comes to 25-foot robotic sharks with nightmarish maws, accept no substitute.

Clockwise from main: "Say that to my face!"; The shark's not broken; Looking mighty real in a scene with Dreyfuss' Hooper.

THE SHOCK

PROSTHETICS KING GREG NICOTERO RHAPSODISES ABOUT BEN GARDNER'S DEAD HEAD



"HOLD ON," SAYS Greg Nicotero. "I have the tooth!" And with that, the *Walking Dead* wizard, the 'N' in leading effects house KNB, disappears from the frame of our Zoom call. He returns seconds later, brandishing a great white tooth. Not just any tooth. This is the tooth that a particular shark left embedded in the hull of Ben Gardner's boat. "I got a casting of the tooth from [special-effects artist] Roy Arbogast," says Nicotero, schoolboy-giddy. "I did a little touch-up on the bottom to make it look more like a real tooth."

The tooth is not, of course, the only evidence that *Jaws*' titular terror paid a visit to the boat of Ben Gardner (Craig Kingsbury), one of Quint's rival fishermen in the Amity area. There's actual Ben Gardner, for one, whose very dead, one-eyed body appears out of nowhere as Matt Hooper conducts a search of the scuttled wreck, and scared the bejesus out of an entire generation. Including a 12-year-old Nicotero. "I will never forget that moment," he says. "When Ben Gardner's head came out, every single head in the entire movie theatre recoiled at the exact same second. It's, without a doubt, one of the greatest jump-scares in cinema history."

Something of a *Jaws* scholar, Nicotero knows all the stories about how the shot was captured, as a reshoot in *Jaws*' editor Verna Fields' swimming pool. He even owns Ben Gardner's head (and shoulders; it's one of the great misconceptions that Ben has been decapitated), moulded on Kingsbury. Well, one of them. "I heard a rumour that Steven [Spielberg] has the Ben Gardner head," laughs Nicotero. "The head I have in my possession doesn't look exactly like the head in the movie. That leads me to believe that they shot it more than once. I believe they shot a version of it in Martha's Vineyard, and reshoot it so they could adjust the timing of when the head comes out."

Nicotero's Gardner head isn't within reach, sadly. Also proving elusive: an exact explanation of how Ben Gardner died, and why he doesn't have an eye. "I think he drowned," says Nicotero. "But I always wondered how the eye popped out." Some mysteries belong to the sea. **CHRIS HEWITT**



THE SEA DOG

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

ROBERT SHAW'S SON IAN ON ADMIRING — AND BECOMING — QUINT

"THERE IS A bit of the showman in him," lays out the preliminary description in Carl Gottlieb's *Jaws* screenplay, "as well as a bit of killer-whale." It's well said. Because if there's a character in *Jaws* to rival the raw screen presence of its *Carcharodon carcharias* villain, it's Robert Shaw's Quint. A grizzled sea dog with a dark past and a flair for interrupting town-hall meetings in the most uncomfortable way possible, he steals scene after scene — hook, line and sinker. If Brody is the strait-laced hero, and Hooper is the plucky academic, then Quint is the wild card, a briny bastard with a death wish and a single obsession: catching and killing Amity's bane.

Shaw, who had previously played memorable villains in the likes of *From Russia With Love*, *The Sting* and *The Taking Of Pelham One Two Three*, sank his teeth into the role with zeal. It's a great character on the page; an iconic one on the

screen. "He had a toughness, and a wildness," Ian Shaw, the star's son, tells *Empire*. "But what you really do notice is the humour, the cheeky singing, the playfulness. That was all Robert. And the film was ahead of its time. I think Hollywood was snobby about that kind of thing. I would have given him an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor."

Initially, Quint comes across as merely a tough bastard, scraping his fingernails down a blackboard and issuing promises with bravado: "I'll find him for three. But I'll catch him and kill him for ten." But just as we get to see more of the shark as the movie goes on, so more of Quint is revealed too. There's that singing — a rousing rendition of traditional naval song 'Spanish Ladies' — and there's his long speech on the Orca, as Quint bares his soul to his two fellow shark-hunters, via a breakdown of the grim fate

of the sailors aboard the USS Indianapolis. "His performance of that is just wonderful," says Ian Shaw of his father. "And the history of it, from Howard Sackler's enormously long version of it, and then John Milius coming in to rewrite it... and then Robert rewrote it."

Shaw's warmth was all there in real life, too. His son recalls the time in 1977 when, seven years old, he finally plucked up the courage to watch *Jaws* for the first time. Like most kids that age, he found himself shaken by it. "I remember being frightened and thinking sharks were swimming around my bed," he says. His dad quickly came in to sooth him, "to kind of give me a cuddle". Providing Ian with that most unique of experiences: a screening of *Jaws* with Quint himself providing comfort.

And while most film-lovers revere Robert Shaw's performance, Ian Shaw has gotten to pay tribute to it in an equally unique way. Every night, he dons a moustache, sideburns, and a familiar



cap and jacket, and takes the stage in *The Shark Is Broken*, a play he co-wrote about the making of *Jaws*, in which he plays his own dad. "I loved him very dearly, and that obviously left an imprint on me for the rest of my life," he says. Currently touring the UK, the play has played to enthusiastic crowds ("We had a request the other day for it to be translated into German") and brought Quint alive in a whole new way. Part showman, part killer whale, he may have been chomped to bits, but he'll forever be immortal.

THE SHARK IS BROKEN IS TOURING THE UK AND IRELAND UNTIL 17 MAY. WWW.THESHARKISBROKEN.COM

Clockwise from main: Robert Shaw as Quint; Sharing a joke with Scheider and Spielberg; Time out before becoming dinner; Shaw's son Ian as his dad in the play *The Shark Is Broken*.

THE SPEECH

LEGENDARY FILMMAKER JOHN MILIUS ON WRITING THE SCORCHING USS INDIANAPOLIS MONOLOGUE



How did you get involved in *Jaws*?

Steven called me. He was having trouble with a scene. Back in '74, before success really hit for us all, everybody (Steven, George [Lucas], Francis [Ford Coppola], etc) worked on each other's stuff. It was just fun to do. I suggested a few ideas including the Indianapolis incident.

A lot of talents claim authorship of the scene. What's the truth?

I came up with it. Steven will confirm this. Edits were certainly made before and while it was filmed.

Is it true you dictated script pages over the phone to Spielberg, who was on location in Martha's Vineyard?

Yes, absolutely. It was two phone calls. The first was to tell me to be prepared to write something about why this guy Quint doesn't like sharks. I thought of a few incidents besides the Indianapolis, both of them involving the area around the Solomons. There were a lot of people eaten by sharks in the Battle of Iron Bottom Sound, and there was the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, in which Japanese transports were strafed with machine-gun fire by US B-52s and P-38s. The sea was filled with wounded Japanese trying to swim to shore and they were feasted on by sharks. The Americans flying over were sickened by the grisly sight.

What function does the speech serve in the script?

It makes clear why Quint hates sharks. The reason that scene is so important and works so well is because your imagination takes over, but you need a really good actor to pull it off. Luckily, we had Robert Shaw.

What do you think of his performance?

He was very, very good and very drunk. I believed he could have served on the Indianapolis.

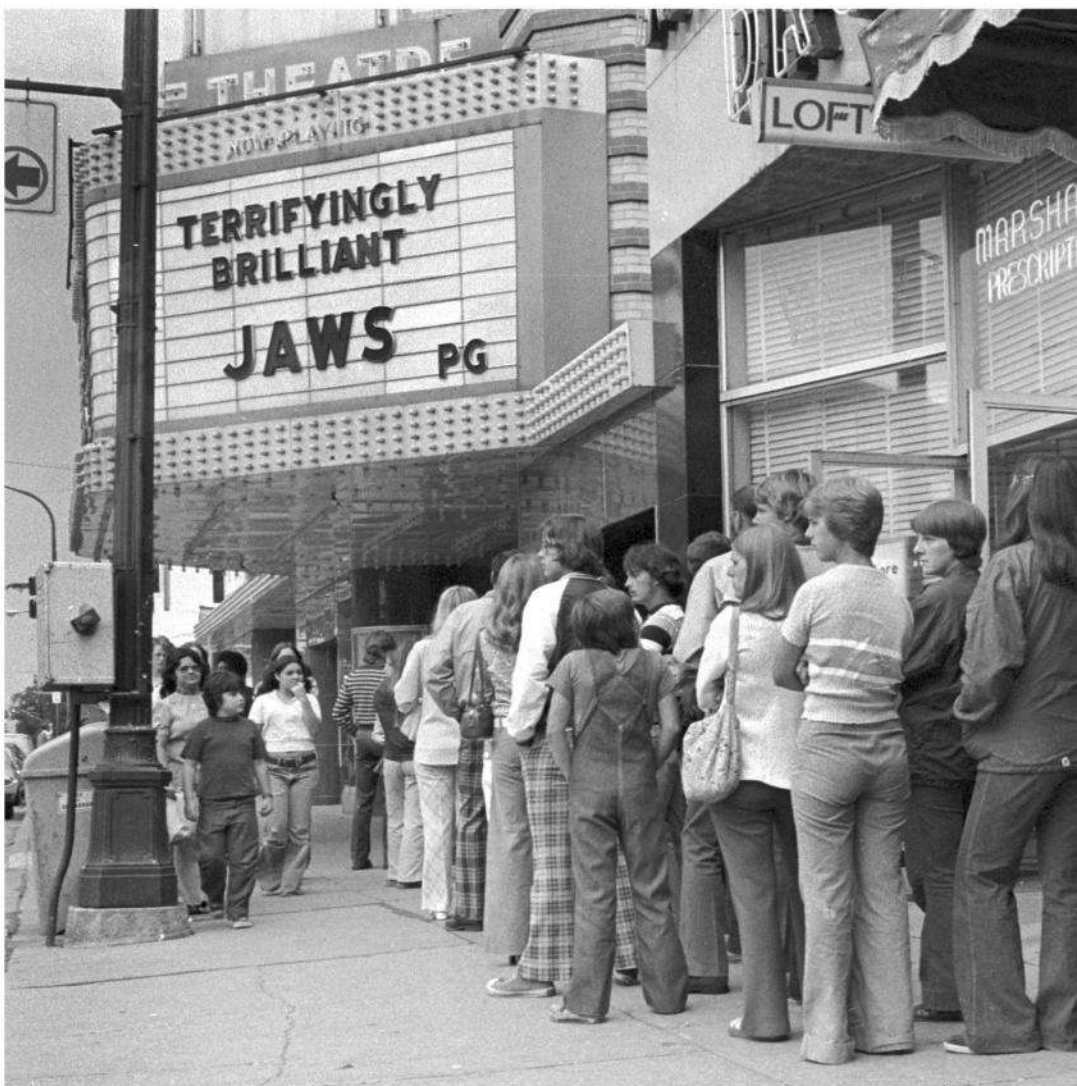
What is the power of the scene? Is it fair to say *Jaws* without the Indianapolis speech is like *Hamlet* without the 'To be or not to be...' monologue?

Yes. The speech elevated the film and made the stakes real for the audience. The description of the shark's black dead eyes sparked terror in the audiences' imagination. **IAN FREER**

TWO YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS*, *JAWS* BIRTHED THE
BLOCKBUSTER AS WE KNOW IT WORDS **IAN FREER**

THE

JAWS



SEVERAL MONTHS BEFORE *Jaws* opened, on 20 June 1975, Steven Spielberg, then just 28, sat in a Universal marketing meeting and floated an idea. His proposition involved a range of little chocolate sharks which, when bitten into, would squirt blood, or more precisely, cherry juice. "We'll clean up," he excitedly told the assembled suits. The myopic marketeers passed.

Sixty-four days after the film's debut, when *Jaws* passed *The Godfather* to become the then highest-grossing film of all time (eventually earning \$478 million worldwide), the executive wonks must have regretted the confectionery kibosh. When the film hit big, Universal scrambled to meet demand, rushing into production licensed merch ranging from T-shirts and shark-teeth jewellery to beach towels and a toilet seat with gnashers. The Universal Studio Store also planned to stock actual shark foetuses contained in small bottles of formaldehyde, until animal-rights activists successfully lobbied to stop the sale.

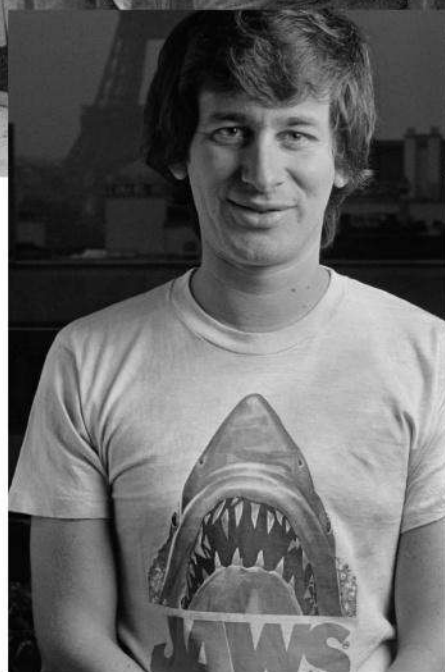
But, without any studio help, the film took on a life all its own. A heartless Maryland entrepreneur created strap-on Styrofoam shark fins. Late-night legend Johnny Carson made lame jokes about having to buy tickets in the shallow end of the "theatre", while Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi played Brody and Hooper on *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*'s iconic Land Shark character, voiced by Chevy Chase, also debuted in 1975). Ice cream flavours became Sharkalate, Jawberry and Finnilla, though sadly not Ben (Gardner) & Jerry's. It got to the point in July where Universal

took out a full-page ad in *The Wall Street Journal* reminding America: "IT'S A MOVIE TOO!"

Films as diverse as *San Francisco* (1936), *Trapeze* (1956) and *The Longest Day* (1962) all achieved huge numbers while the sun shined, but *Jaws* is unequivocally the most influential, important and game-changing summer blockbuster (for UK audiences, a Christmas blockbuster — like *Star Wars*, *Jaws* opened on Boxing Day). Universal spent a whopping \$1.8 million on promo, including \$700,000 on TV commercials ("It's as if God created the devil and gave him... *JAWS*"), ushering in new levels of pre-release publicity.

It also fundamentally brought about a change in the way movies were showcased. The film was due to open on 1,000 screens but, after a gangbusters preview in Dallas, MCA President and Universal Pictures head honcho Lew Wasserman decided to scale the release strategy back to 409 screens in North America, forcing cinemas to guarantee a 12-week run with engagements added throughout the summer. The trifecta of the advertising and marketing blitzkrieg, thoughtful roll-out strategy and a movie that delivered saw Spielberg's film gather momentum across an entire season rather than just a smash-and-grab opening weekend. Perhaps more than anything, this is *Jaws*' significance. For better or worse, it shifted the needle in Hollywood to a new way of thinking about the movies that got made and how (and when) they were released.

Perhaps the biggest boon for the audience

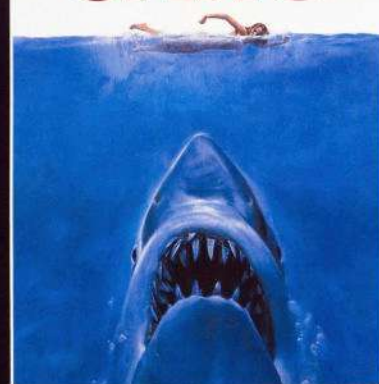


Main: Queuing around the block outside the State Theatre, Ann Arbor, Michigan, on 14 July 1975.
Left: Spielberg rocks some *Jaws* merch, shortly after completing the movie in September 1975.

created by the *Jaws* phenomenon is that it minted Steven Spielberg. Not so much financially — although his 2.5 per cent of the net profits made him a wealthy young man — but more so in the creative autonomy it granted. Spielberg once suggested the film's success bought him “a free ticket for half a dozen rides” and, from then on, he built the greatest directorial career in modern movies — next up was *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*. But, never forget, *Jaws* may be a film that has impacted licensing, promotion, exhibition and film history itself but, as the advert goes, it's a movie too. And one of the greatest ever made.

The terrifying motion picture
from the terrifying No.1 best seller.

JAWS



ROY SCHEIDER ROBERT SHAW RICHARD DREYFUSS
JAWS

Co-starring LORRAINE GARY • MURRAY HAMILTON • A ZANUCK/BROWN PRODUCTION
Screenplay by PETER BENCHLEY and CARL GOTTLEB • Based on the novel by PETER BENCHLEY • Music by JOHN WILLIAMS
Directed by STEVEN SPIELBERG • Produced by RICHARD D. ZANUCK and DAVID BROWN • A UNIVERSAL PICTURE •
TECHNICOLOR® PANAVISION® PG PARENTAL STRONG CAUTION: SOME MATERIAL MAY BE INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 13 MAY BE TOO INTENSE FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

THE POSTER

A PIECE OF MARKETING ART WITH REAL BITE

A WOMAN SWIMS through the ocean, blissfully oblivious of the humongous great white shark with a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth rising to the surface below her. The poster for *Jaws* isn't just a great ad for a movie; it's a timeless depiction of a primal human fear. “Everybody can relate to it,” says Josh Manderville, managing art director of poster company Mondo. “You could [have drawn] a *Jaws* poster in the 12th century and it would be just as impactful. It taps into the fears we all have around our spot on the food chain.”

The design started as a book cover. When Peter Benchley's novel was published in 1974, a year before Spielberg adapted it, the hardback featured a black-and-white image by artist Paul Bacon. Some key elements were already in place, including the massive shark head that merely implies the creature's true size. “It looks like a spearhead,” says Manderville. “Not seeing a threat and knowing it's there is terrifying.”

For the paperback, illustrator Roger Kastel was brought in to juice up the cover. He went to New York's American Museum of Natural History to photograph great whites, embellishing those fearsome fangs, and had a model from a *Good Housekeeping* photoshoot balance on a stool to demonstrate the front crawl. Crucially, he also added colour and a horizon line. “The red, white and blue is very intentional, with the film taking place during the Fourth of July,” says Manderville. “Spielberg refers to the importance of having the horizon at the top in *The Fabermans*, in the meeting with John Ford. This composition puts us in the water. We're seeing what she's not seeing.”

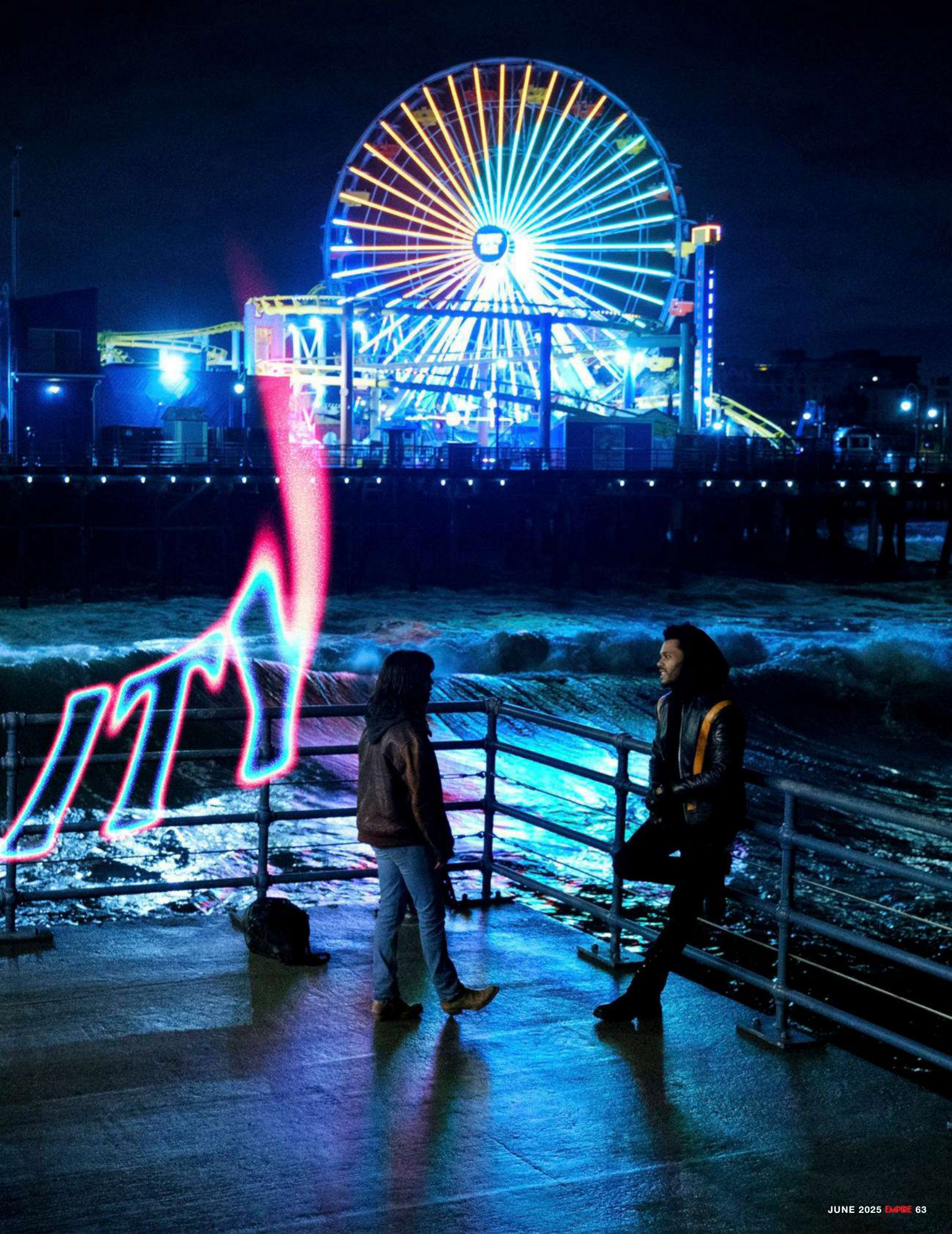
Universal loved the cover so much they convinced publishers Bantam Books to let them use it to advertise the film, and it quickly became iconic. Kastel went on to design more classic film posters, including *The Empire Strikes Back*, but *Jaws* remains his masterpiece. “It's about taking nature for granted,” says Manderville. “The woman is carefree, swimming without clothes, but below her is the reality of humanity facing nature, and our helplessness in the void of the universe.” **KEVIN EG PERRY**

WORDS **AL HORNER**

SURF CHECK

FOR HIS FOLLOW-UP TO ACCLAIMED DRAMA WAVES, DIRECTOR TREY EDWARD SHULTS TEAMS UP

WITH THE WEEKND'S ABEL TESFAYE FOR EXISTENTIAL THRILLER **HURRY UP TOMORROW**. READY TO TAKE A TRIP?





lights weren't just blinding — they burned that night at LA's SoFi Stadium too, a fierce heat overcoming Abel Tesfaye as he broke down in front of 80,000 fans. It was the final show of his 2022 North American tour, and the Canadian pop sensation known as The Weeknd was in a hot sweat, struggling to get through the opening track of his set. "I'd gone on stage before with the flu, a high fever, with injuries, after deaths in the family and break-ups, and I was always able to rely on my voice," he tells *Empire*. Not on this occasion. Less than a minute in, stood atop a John Carpenter-esque replica of a burnt-out skyscraper, his voice began to falter. Realising he couldn't fight through the problem, he departed the stage, reappearing minutes later to give an emotional apology. "I can't give you what I want to give you," he told fans — a line that, in some parallel universe, might have been the chorus to one of his heartache-adorned anthems.

Social-media footage of the incident shows fans applauding compassionately. In that moment of panic and paranoia, though, all Tesfaye could hear reverberating around the arena was anger and rage. The next day, he visited medical professionals to see just how bad the damage to his vocal cords was. To his surprise, he was told that nothing was wrong. "There was a little bit of inflammation, but that was it," he recalls; the problem was psychological. "I think it was a test. What happens if this thing that you're relying on too much is taken away from you?" Or to put the question another way: who is Abel Tesfaye without his Weeknd alter-ego?

"I think that ended up being the question I had to answer," confides the 35-year-old, who, for over a decade, had been breaking records under that moniker. The most listened-to artist on Spotify, with 120 million monthly listeners. The best-performing song in Billboard Chart history (2020's 'Blinding Lights', which charted for 90 consecutive weeks). Five albums, three mixtapes, seven world tours and one then-impending TV show he co-created and starred in, in the shape of HBO's *The Idol* — it had all brought Tesfaye success (with the

exception of *The Idol* — a misfire that was cancelled after one season). But it'd also led him to the brink of some sort of collapse, with some unknown force — "whether it was God or my subconscious" — trying to stage an intervention. "I think that I needed that experience, on the biggest stage of my career, because that way I couldn't ignore it."

The result of the soul-searching that followed? One of 2025's most intriguing dramas. *Hurry Up Tomorrow* is a psychological thriller co-written by and starring Tesfaye in his first major movie role. It's an "alternate reality" account of that incident on stage in 2022, accompanied by a tie-in album of the same name that's already racked up tens of millions of streams on music platforms. Tempted to dismiss the movie as a pop-star vanity project? Do so at your peril, given the talent on board. Jenna Ortega and Barry Keoghan round out *Hurry Up Tomorrow*'s cast, with one of the most interesting new filmmakers around in the director's seat.

"It's kinda like *Raging Bull* and *Persona* meets *Purple Rain*," beams Trey Edward Shults, whose involvement raised eyebrows when the film was announced in 2023. Why would the writer-director behind two of the most cult, acclaimed A24 indies of the last decade, 2017's *It Comes At Night* and 2019's *Waves*, make his next movie a pop-star puff-piece? ("A lot of people were expecting an extended music video, like *Lemonade*," admits the director, nodding to Beyoncé's narrative-less 2016 visual album.)

Clockwise from main:
Abel Tesfaye, aka The Weeknd — playing a version of himself — contemplates life, the universe and everything; Annie (Jenna Ortega) likes to leave her mark; Writer-director Trey Edward Shults with Tesfaye and Ortega on set; Lee (Barry Keoghan) is looking good.





The answer is, because *Hurry Up Tomorrow* attempts something else altogether. It's a cerebral nail-biter out to redefine what a music movie can be, claim those involved — and a project that pulls from Shults' own moment of existential collapse as much as Tesfaye's. Four years ago, you see, in the midst of depression and ill health, the filmmaker wasn't sure what tomorrow he was hurrying into.

Waves told the powerful story of a high-schooler — Tyler, played by Kelvin Harrison Jr — who suffers a shoulder injury that torpedoes his dreams of becoming a professional wrestler. That disappointment puts in motion a spiral that ends in tragedy, sending shockwaves through a community and ripping Tyler's family apart. The film was a critical smash but sank without a trace at the

box office, making just \$2.5 million against a \$6 million budget. "It felt like defeat," says the Orlando-based filmmaker today. "I put everything I had into that movie, and by the end of it, I was burnt out."

The filmmaker had poured his own life into the drama — like Tyler, he'd had a shoulder injury that curtailed his own fledgling wrestling career, and entire scenes were based on interactions with his family, including a storyline inspired by a road trip to see his terminally ill father. On the road for five months to promote it at film festivals, "My health was not good. I wasn't getting much sleep. I was drinking nearly every day." In the movie's aftermath, "it was really hard letting go of that and then being excited to do something new... I was pretty depressed."

It took a meeting with Tesfaye to pull him out of that funk. "I always wanted to make films," says the musician, an Asian-horror aficionado who counts Larry Clark and David Cronenberg as influences and the Safdie Brothers as collaborators (he made a brief cameo in 2019's *Uncut Gems*). "I wanted to be a filmmaker from a really young age, but it didn't feel like too much of a reality coming from where I come from. So I got into music, and thought, 'Maybe this can be my ticket to Hollywood.'"

With the scare at SoFi Stadium behind him, Tesfaye — whose music videos had often paid tributes to film classics like *Heat*, *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, *Blade Runner* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* — felt the time was finally right to make the leap. He had an idea for a movie that would use a real-life incident as a jumping-off point for a fictional tale about someone who feels their body betray them, disconnecting them from the thing

that defines them. So he reached out to Shults, because who better to tell such a story than the man behind *Waves*, which Tesfaye had seen at its Toronto premiere (the pair had never met; both admired each other's work from afar).

Initially, Shults was sceptical. "I don't know what I expected. It surprised me how much we clicked. Abel was straight-up like: 'If we do this, I want you to make it a full Trey [Edward Shults] movie. I want you to bring yourself to it.'" What Tesfaye had in mind "was confrontational and different" and would thread in songs from an as-yet-unwritten album — but wasn't designed to bolster his streaming numbers, as many might expect. "Whether you know The Weeknd or not almost didn't matter," says Shults. The filmmaker soon realised this "was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Any other pop star or person of his level would not be so down to make something that's not self-serving".

Tesfaye's vision involved "a musician plagued by insomnia, who's pulled into an odyssey with a stranger who begins to unravel the very core of his existence". Among his touchstones were Federico Fellini's *Toby Dammit* ("That was a big inspiration for the performance") and films that "play with the audience's perception", like Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder*. Inspired by the premise, Shults went on "a writing tear", working on the script between long, exploratory phone calls with Tesfaye about each other's innermost demons. "We'd just talk and get to know each other and I'd get to know his past... I called them our therapy sessions," the director laughs.

What they ended up with was a screenplay dripped in meta meaning. "The main character's name is Abel. It's very much implied that this is The Weeknd," says Shults. "But the Abel you see in the movie is not the Abel I know personally. It's drawing on personal things that he's wrestled with his entire life, imagining if he'd surrounded himself with the wrong people and made some wrong choices. When we meet him in the movie, he's at breaking point. He needs a wake-up call." And if the film's co-stars are to be believed, *Hurry Up Tomorrow* gives him one.

In the film, Jenna Ortega plays Annie — a fan who enters Abel's orbit with life-altering consequences. "I think in the first draft, she started off as kind of like [*American Psycho*'s] Patrick Bateman. But by the time we actually started shooting, my understanding was that Annie stands for *anima*, the female part of one's brain," says the actor. "My perception of her was that she is Abel. She's the feminine side of Abel. The sweet side." Exactly how sweet remains to be seen; the film's trailer shows the musician tied to a bedpost with Annie looming over him.



"The film is kind of about Abel struggling with these two sides of himself. He's been neglecting his *anima* and has no understanding of what that is in his life because ever since he went on to live this life as a musician, he felt pressured to be something else," continues Ortega, who — between getting to know Tesfaye through this project, and recent work with Lady Gaga on Season 2 of *Wednesday* — has become fascinated by the pressures unique to pop stardom that *Hurry Up Tomorrow* captures in its margins. "You can see the chaos around them, the way that people treat them differently, and I can understand how that could be a very scary position to be in."

"Everyone in this industry, whether music or movies, we can all relate in terms of being in the spotlight," agrees Barry Keoghan, who plays Lee — Abel's right-hand man. "It has its ups and downs. It has its invasions of privacy. And there have definitely been moments where, even though I'm nowhere near [Tesfaye's] level of stardom, I've felt that [scariness]."

In *Hurry Up Tomorrow*, Lee, Abel and Annie's lives become intertwined in an adventure that brings that terror to life. But the film is not a treatise on fame. That may be a go-to topic in the music of The Weeknd, but here, Tesfaye wanted to expand into themes of "abandonment and mental health... It's not about celebrity culture. It's really just about humans".

"Sometimes it's not everyone else that's messing up — it's you. You have to own up to your flaws and really reflect in order to grow," adds Shults, alluding to "moments in my life where I realised I had to look at myself

in the mirror and confront myself... that's a heavy thing going on thematically here with Abel's character."

"We all have these versions of ourselves, and we all have these guards up," says Keoghan, whose character has "real love for Abel... but there's toxicity brewing". *Hurry Up Tomorrow*, he says, sees Tesfaye "trying to force that guard down and let us in. I can totally relate with going to those depths of despair — where there's no more forward you can go, so you've got to look inwards".

It all builds to a third act that Ortega teases as "crazy" and Shults says will shock many watching. It certainly shocked him when Tesfaye agreed to the boundary-pushing conclusion he had in mind. "I remember when I was outlining that part, going to the kitchen and saying to my wife, 'He's never going to go for this!'" Little did he know then that Tesfaye was down for pretty much anything. Because *Hurry Up Tomorrow* is a rebirth — a new phase — for both of them. The film represents everything they have to give.

Have you ever pointed a camera in Los Angeles without a palm tree in frame? It's practically impossible. For *Hurry Up Tomorrow*, that was the task Shults set himself, as he went about creating a backdrop for the film that's purposefully disorientating. The world of the film feels at once like LA and not LA, because



“that’s the character’s head space. He doesn’t fully know where he is. He’s in a hazy place mentally. It feels kind of like a dream where it’s like, ‘I *think* I know where I am, but I’m not quite sure.’”

It helped that during the film’s production, the city was beset by the most un-LA thing imaginable — bad weather. “We got really lucky because while we were shooting there were these historic floods. There’s so much rain in the movie and that helped with what we were going for.” Among the locations used were the city’s Santa Monica Pier and a Californian beach cave in which Abel is “having this kind of nightmare sequence”, as Ortega puts it. “He walks up to [my character] trying to get her attention, and she starts screaming and contorting and...” She trails off, unable to say more, but adds, “I *love* horror,” with devilish glee.

“We had some hard days,” says Shults, reflecting on the film’s production. “The big thing for me was that we got to shoot on film for the first time. On *It Comes At Night* and *Waves*, [I wanted to] shoot on film, but we had to shoot digitally. The first thing I ever worked on was for Terrence Malick as a film loader, loading IMAX mags. So [getting to shoot on film] — that alone was freaking huge for me,” he grins.

Even more freaking huge, to borrow Shults’ expression, was the return of his creative spark through *Hurry Up Tomorrow*, after the setbacks that followed *Waves*. “Right now, I’m fully revitalised,” he says. “We made this on our own (*the film was financed independently, before being bought by Lionsgate*). There was no bullshit from a studio. Usually, there’s a lot of shit you have to go through when you’re dealing with the financing side of things, fighting for your creative integrity. Here, we got to follow our hearts and do what we wanted.”

For Tesfaye, meanwhile, the buzz came from using the project as a means of potentially “closing a chapter” on The Weeknd, as he puts it. In January, he hinted that it was a project that “I just don’t have any more desire for”, describing how “it becomes this rat race: more accolades, more success, more shows, more albums, more awards and more number ones. It never ends until you end it”. Today, he adds that, “I’ve been playing a character as The Weeknd. But, you know, I think I’m ready to shed that skin, and this film helped me do that.”

One thing’s for sure. “I can’t give you what I want to give you,” he told fans that night on stage at the SoFi Stadium. With this step into cinema, he gave himself something for a change — the realisation of a childhood dream, of being a big-screen filmmaker. No need to hurry up tomorrow now — both Tesfaye and Shults, after hard times, are finally savouring today. 🍷

Clockwise from main: Shults gives direction to Tesfaye; Annie gets too close for comfort; Looking ahead; Lee and Abel having a moment.



HURRY UP TOMORROW IS IN CINEMAS FROM 16 MAY



REBEL

THE FIRST
SEASON OF
ANDOR

CHANGED THE
STAR WARS GAME,
THRUSTING
THE SAGA INTO
PRESTIGE TV
TERRITORY. NOW,
WITH SEASON 2
WRAPPING IT
ALL UP, STAR
DIEGO LUNA
AND WRITER

TONY GILROY
REFLECT ON THE
DECADE-LONG
JOURNEY OF THEIR
REVOLUTIONARY
HERO

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**

YELL





CASSIAN ANDOR WAS DEAD, TO BEGIN WITH.

Just like the rest of the *Rogue One* crew. Because, as *Star Wars* fans learned in 2016, the plot to snaffle those all-important Death Star plans was, in fact, a suicide mission for all involved. Diego Luna's shady Rebel hero perished on the Scarif beach alongside Jyn Erso. Dead, done, dusted.

Or not. Because six years later, in 2022, Cassian Andor — somehow — returned, in a show that, frankly, few were asking for: the world was not waiting for a Cassian Andor prequel series. As it turned out, *Andor* Season 1, set five years prior to Gareth Edwards' *Rogue One*, was some of the most essential *Star Wars* ever willed into existence — a fiercely political, defiantly grown-up slice of sci-fi co-credited to Tony Gilroy, who had boarded the film during production for still-unspecified levels of retooling. Gilroy's show took the opera out of George Lucas' space-opera, instead delivering human stakes, socio-political grit, and out-

of-this-galaxy writing. Let's just say Anakin's sand speech in *Attack Of The Clones* is no longer *Star Wars*' most moving monologue.

Now, with Season 2, Luna and Gilroy are sending *Andor* out with a bang — presenting four final 'chapters' set over four years, right up to the events of *Rogue One*, taking our hero from scrappy believer to die-for-the-cause revolutionary. It marks the culmination of a ten-year journey for both star and writer, one last blast of uncompromising storytelling set to leave nothing on the table. They're about to bid farewell to *Star Wars* for good — but not before reuniting for a rambunctious conversation with *Empire*.

Diego, do you remember your first day as Cassian Andor on *Rogue One*?

Diego Luna: I do. I was wearing a very thick jacket — a fantastic, blue, gigantic jacket with a collar. You know, *the jacket*. I tried [it on] for seven months, to tweak and do this and that. For some time, I thought I actually got the job because I fitted the jacket. (Laughs) The first day of shooting was in Jordan, and I'm asked to wear

the jacket in 48 degrees. The jacket just turned against me. It was like, "Fuck! The jacket! What a bad idea!"

Tony, what was your first day like with Diego on *Rogue One*?

Tony Gilroy: I am not telling you that! That is a very good effort on your part. You tried to sneak it in there. I'm not gonna go there.

I'm not digging!

Gilroy: I'll just say this: the [*Rogue One*] characters needed straightening out. They needed to be simplified. They needed passion about something. They needed *need*. And [that cast] was an incredible relief — I've been watching [Diego] forever, going, "If this guy's not an asshole, this is going to be great, because he's a great actor." You know what, I'm... You're getting me in trouble. That's as much as I'm gonna say!

Okay. So what was your final day like on *Andor* Season 2?

Gilroy: We were there together. It was after



Clockwise from main: Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) returns for *Andor* Season 2; Revolutionary leader Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård); Senate turned Rebel Alliance leader Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly); Director Tony Gilroy with Luna on set.



the strike. We came back to pick up shots, things that I can't really talk about. We were at Pinewood, and the kids in the editing room put together a ten-minute Season 2 best-of master cut. We all walked over to the stage, found a glass of something, made some speeches and watched [it]. It was as emotional as you can possibly imagine. It was five-and-a-half years of work.

Luna: Both [season wraps] were very special. Season 1, the actual last shot was the jump of [the aquatic prison break], "One way out!" Like, we really jumped, and then (*mimics clapperboard*). And this was in Covid time, so it was just us, and Tony on a [video] connection. [The Narkina 5 prisoners] getting out of jail [felt like] a metaphor for us getting out of Pinewood after eight months of shooting in Covid, where you couldn't interact with anyone. It felt [like] some kind of jail. We *chose* the jail. But pretty much we felt left alone. On this one it was very, very powerful, because we had exactly what we couldn't have on the first one — and we were saying goodbye. The energy was like the

wrapper-up of a film, like, "Shit, what am I gonna do tomorrow?"

Season 2 has a finite ending, leading straight into *Rogue One*. How are you feeling now that you've told Cassian Andor's story in its totality? Diego, you've been with Cassian for ten years.

Luna: I don't think I've been with the same character for ten years. I discovered the character over ten years. I knew what I needed to know to tell the story in *Rogue One*. But the character has developed for me in front of my eyes. It's just, we started telling the story the other way around. The beauty of this is that the journey of Cassian [in *Andor* Season 2] is going to re-signify *Rogue One*. Audiences won't be able to see *Rogue One* from the same perspective you saw it [in 2016]. Every line Cassian gives in *Rogue One* is gonna mean something different for you. You'll see him walking in that alley, with that jacket, and know what he left behind. Which is very cool and interesting, for a film that is almost ten years old.

What's something that you understand about Cassian now, that you didn't on *Rogue One*?

Gilroy: We did 24 hours of what's different! That's the show!

Luna: The simple [answer] is, when you are specific about what that sacrifice means, it's a different story. You know when he gives that speech in *Rogue One*? Now you're gonna have images that will come when he says that.

Season 1 got into the prison industrial complex, stop and search, stripping resources under colonisation, the financial burden of rebellion. Can you tease what Season 2 explores?

Gilroy: It took a whole season to change Cassian from a disinterested roach into the guy who says, "Man, I'm in. Kill me or take me. I'm fully committed." Now, we have four years to examine what it takes to get him to be this super all-singing, all-dancing, spy-war-fighter. [Stellan Skarsgård's] Luthen is a very good talent scout, and his attempted advancement of Cassian is >



a theme all the way through the second season. It's sort of like a startup company where [Luthen's] been building this revolution at home for 15 years. Now, all of a sudden, he's going public. What do you do if your currency is privacy and secrecy, and failure is death? How do you scale up? How do you play with others? How do all the disparate pieces of the Rebellion come together in [Rebel base] Yavin? More than anything, what is the real effect of time — pressurised, *painful* time — on ordinary people that hopefully you care a lot about? What happens to their love affairs? Their relationships? Their homes? Their children? What happens to everything around them, if you're thrust into this vice-grip of revolution? Those are the big tectonic moves of the second season.

Does a show like *Andor* get made if it isn't a *Star Wars* show? In the entertainment landscape, or the political landscape?

Gilroy: No-one's gonna let you spend this money, that's for sure! If you can't climb in through some kind of IP right now, how are you going to have the kind of canvas? It would be impossible.

Luna: It's very lucky. I don't see this happening ever again.

Gilroy: This will never happen again. And we were protected all the way down the line. Kathy [Kennedy] protected us. Lucasfilm protected us. [Disney CEO] Bob Iger protected us. The audience protected us. *The Mandalorian* protected us. We had all these people out there backing our play. And as long as we kept our business tucked away, and made our days, and kept doing our thing, and then the show gets so huge that people don't know what to do... We had a lot of protection, and ultimate freedom. This won't happen again — not because we're so great, but



because no-one's ever gonna start a show on this scale again, and shoot it practically, and have the resources *and* the protection to do something like this.

You say this show was protected by *The Mandalorian*. What do you mean?

Gilroy: Well, the success of *The Mandalorian* gave us the platform to jump off. Their success is what would fuel the whole thing. I mean, no Baby Yoda, no *Andor*. Seriously. Don't think that we don't know that. Online, [people] try to drive a wedge all the time between us, and [fellow current *Star Wars* creatives] [Jon] Favreau and [Dave] Filoni. It's horrible what people say; it's terrible. And the truth is, we don't have a show without them. They gave us the muscle to go.

With Season 1 you had real narrative freedom, being five years out from *Rogue One*. On Season 2, you're moving further into established canon — not just *Rogue One*, but there's even an episode of animated series *Star Wars: Rebels* in which Mon Mothma escapes the Senate, which feels very core to the *Andor* story. It'll be intriguing to see how you navigate those canonical limitations.

Gilroy: Ha! Well, you'll be even more intrigued when you see it. I mean, the highlights [of the *Star Wars* canon] are on the calendar. But after ten years we've invented vastly more canon than we've ever had to [adhere to]. When we started on *Rogue*, there were things that we couldn't do at all. You couldn't have a bathroom! Then they had a bathroom on *Mandalorian*. "Wait, we were gonna do a bathroom in *Rogue*! How do they get to do a bathroom?!" There are certain things [in canon] that we are beholden to, and [others] that are really great opportunities for us. [The

Clockwise from main: Season 1: *Andor* and fellow inmates escape the Imperial Prison Complex on Narkina 5; Talking gadgets with Rebel commando Karis Nemik (Alex Lawther); Maarva *Andor* (Fiona Shaw) attends — as a hologram — her own funeral. As you do.

massacre at] Ghorman is a big opportunity. Everybody knows that Mon Mothma leaves the Senate because of Ghorman. At the same time, there isn't a single thing written about Ghorman. Ghorman's a blank slate. There's no consistency between what *Legends* [non-canonical novels] says about it, and a lot of conflicts within the canon itself. So we honour the calendar, and we've made our choices. Some are sneaky, some are bold, some are right in your face. Everybody at Lucasfilm knows what we've been doing, we haven't had any arguments. We've straightened some stuff out, I hope.

Diego, you imagined a backstory for Cassian Andor on *Rogue One*. Did you manage to get some of that into *Andor*?

Gilroy: I don't wanna know what that was! I'm not interested in this question! (*Laughs*)

Luna: No, no! Nothing of what I decided...

Rogue One was also a process. [But] once we finished *Rogue One*, nothing — not a single choice I made back then — didn't make sense with the story we were telling. I didn't have to go, like, "Shit! Oh my God, how am I gonna deal with this in my head? Because I thought..." No, everything made sense perfectly.



Top to bottom:
Rogue One: Andor clad in his infamous jacket; With Jyn Erso (Felicity Jones), ready for the end; Andor, Jyn and K-2SO (Alan Tudyk) join forces; The calm before the Scarif storm.

Have you two ever disagreed on something about Cassian Andor?

Luna: An argument? I'm not that kind of person.

Gilroy: I *am* that kind of person! (*Laughs*) There's some complicated things we have to do, but I don't think we ever had a disagreement. That's really weird! I hope we get to try to do something else together, and see if we have a fight. That would be great.

Luna: If we had to, I don't know, build a house together, we probably would [argue]. Anyone that has worked with Tony's material, no-one could tell you that there is not enough there to lose yourself [in] as an actor. It's so specific, it's so layered. It's very rich.

There are so many highlights in Season 1's writing — Nemik's manifesto, Maarva Andor's message at the funeral, Luthen Rael's monologue. Is there anything in Season 2 that you think will impact audiences on that level?

Gilroy: God, I hope so.

Luna: More than one.

Gilroy: More than one, yeah. I mean, we know what we have to do. We never had a moment



where we let down [after Season 1]. Everybody knew that we couldn't be over-confident. And we also knew, if this works [on Season 1], we'd better write a bigger cheque for the second season. We knew that we had to go big. So, that's what we're trying to do. I mean, *hell* yeah. Hell *yes*. There hopefully are a lot of moments.

Luna: I have an answer for that one: not just in the [second] season. Even in *Rogue One*, you're gonna hear some lines [on a rewatch] and go (*gasps gutturally*). Before, you just passed over them. Not anymore.

Given the incredible reception to *Andor*, is there a part of you both that wishes you had done a five-season version?

Gilroy: (*Gigantic laugh*) Really? Is that a serious question? We've been doing this for almost six years! Look at us! Look at what happened to us! We were young and strong when we started!

Luna: Three years-and-a-half, it takes to make it. And then you've gotta promote it, and... To do five seasons, then it would be like, "Okay, you have to do it in half of the time, and you have to be doing two at the same time." It's impossible. You'd need two Tony Gilroys.

Have you have talked about working on a project together that isn't *Star Wars*?

Gilroy: I would love to.

Luna: Me, too.

Gilroy: I would just like to cook dinner with [him]. I just like to watch him cook. I like to be his prep chef.

Tony, are you a *Star Wars* fan now?

Gilroy: I think I'm more than a *fan*! I've been sitting on 27 hours of canon, man! I have a pretty big piece of real estate out there that's *Star Wars*, at this point. It's probably the most important thing I'll ever do in my career. It's the most important work I'll ever do. I really feel that way, certainly as a writer. For all the suspicion about my motivation from the [fan] community or whatever, I'm an original gangster at this point.

That status is undisputed. Diego, do you ever see yourself playing Cassian Andor again? In *Star Wars*, the end is never necessarily the end...

Luna: I can answer [with] the same thing I would have answered when we released *Rogue One*: Yes, of course, this is the end.

Gilroy: What a good answer! (*To Empire*) I hope you got that one. 🍌

ANDOR SEASON 2 IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 23 APRIL





For years, a team of friends have been pouring their hearts and souls into folk-music comedy **THE BALLAD OF WALLIS ISLAND**. We meet them to discuss tears and Calippos

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

Every performer's career is destined to have that one doomed gig.

Whether you're an actor, a musician, a comedian, or an experimental avant-garde mime artist, the ignominy of performing to a tiny audience is like a rite of passage — something you must endure, if only for the anecdote. For the comedian, writer, actor and poet Tim Key, one particular evening lingers in the mind.

"I once did a show in the Hen & Chickens pub in Islington, where there were two of us on stage, and two in the audience," Key recalls, with a mordant laugh. "And then — we needed two volunteers [on stage]." He smiles. "Well, at that point, it's real tree-falling-in-the-forest stuff."

Tom Basden, Key's longtime comedic collaborator, chuckles heartily at hearing this story about his friend. "Well, the maths does add up," Basden notes. "Around this time we did a show at this big house in Devon, taking turns to perform in this living room, to six people after dinner. A bit like kids doing a song at Christmas for the family. There really is something very funny about doing a really small gig to someone really rich. That probably was an influence on us here."

"Here", to be clear, is *The Ballad Of Wallis Island*, a film that Key and Basden have co-written, and co-star in, about doing a really small gig to someone really rich. It's a sweet British indie comedy concerning a lonely lottery winner named Charles (Key), who lives on a remote island off the Welsh coast. A charmingly bumbling motormouth who says things like, "To paraphrase The Beatles, there goes the sun!", Charles decides to spend some of his millions on a private concert by his favourite folk heroes, Herb McGwyer (Basden) and Nell Mortimer (Carey Mulligan). This, despite the fact that the singer-songwriter duo have long since split up, personally and professionally, and despite the fact that the only audience member will, in fact, be Charles.

Unlike Key's sardonic poet stand-up character, or Basden's goofy Ancient Rome sitcom *Plebs*, this sees the sometime comedy duo making something more earnest, heartfelt and naturalistic. A comedy laced with music, memory and emotion. "It's really



sweet," says Carey Mulligan, Key and Basden's co-star in the film. "Tim and Tom's friendship is amazing, just how long they've known each other. I think that makes it all the more meaningful. They're not just people who are making a film together."

This is a romantic, musical comedy-drama nearly two decades in the making, and in more ways than one, it's a reunion of old friends. "You wouldn't know it by our careers," says Key with a smile, "but this was our priority for the past 17 years." On *Wallis Island*, they are getting the band back together.

TIM KEY AND TOM BASDEN FIRST

met in the early noughties, as students at Cambridge University. (Strictly speaking, Basden was a student, while Key was simply a local who pretended to be a student — "covert-ops pantomime" as he would later describe it — in order to get into Cambridge's famous Footlights comedy troupe.) It was only after university, however, that their real education began.

"It all kicked off when we started doing a sketch show called *Cowards* in 2004," says Key. "We lived in each other's pockets for about three or four years, writing tons and tons of sketches. What that meant for me and Tom was that we really learned how to

write." Basden chimes in: "It was like The Beatles, living in Hamburg," he deadpans. "I didn't want to bring up Hamburg," says Key, playing along. "But yeah — it was The Beatles in Hamburg."

From this feverish, 10,000-hour character-comedy boot camp, hundreds of ideas were conjured up. "I remember Tim specifically writing a sketch called 'Pickle'," recalls Basden, "which is about four guys who want to make some pickle. It's fair to say there were no jokes in it at all. We just found it really, really funny. And couldn't identify what on earth was funny about it." As their sketch-writing prowess grew, Key and Basden started making short films, too. One involved a New Year's Eve party where just two people showed up. Another depicted a policeman chasing a robber into a hedge maze, where they remain trapped indefinitely. ("Eventually it cuts to 30 years later and we're living there together happily," explains Basden.) The third short they made, released in 2007, was entitled *The One And Only Herb McGwyer Plays Wallis Island*.

This is where director James Griffiths came into the picture. "I had Tim and Tom audition for the same role in a Barclaycard commercial," recalls Griffiths on how he met the pair (Basden won the role). "I had such



Clockwise from main: Island life: Herb McGwyer (Tom Basden), Nell Mortimer (Carey Mulligan) and Charles (Tim Key); Perfect harmony; Director James Griffiths on set; Rolling out the red carpet, remote-Welsh-island-style.

a great time working with them, so I started going to see them at various pubs around London. Tom would play guitar and Tim would do his poetry. It was beautiful — kind of anti-comedy comedy.” Griffiths was quickly recruited to direct the *Wallis Island* short, which features plenty of plot points and character beats that have since been retained for the feature: a lonely but lovable millionaire played by Key; a famous folk musician played by Basden, unwittingly hired for a private gig; the dramatic backdrop of a remote Welsh island; and their characteristically British, understatedly awkward sense of humour — what Key calls an “interest in mundane things”.

The 25-minute film was a modest production, shot over no more than a couple of days, but it rapidly became a core memory for them all. “At the time it was early on in our careers, and it was a formative experience,” says Griffiths. “The short film just acted as a lightning rod,” says Key. “In my mind, it was just incontrovertibly one of the best things that I’d ever done.”



They had something here. After the film won an award at the Edinburgh Film Festival and was nominated for another at the 2008 BAFTAs, bigger plans were being explored with production company Big Talk, at the time the home of Edgar Wright. “We started developing a movie,” remembers Griffiths. “But I think we lost our way a little bit. They wanted a sort of Edgar Wright version of what we were doing, and none of us were willing to go there. I love Edgar, I love what they do, but it’s not what we were doing or wanting to do.”

The idea of a movie eventually lay dormant. Months turned to years. Griffiths moved to Los Angeles, and went on to direct episodes of US TV shows like *Blackish* and *A Million Little Things*, plus the Nick Frost comedy film *Cuban Fury*. Key and Basden continued to work separately and together: Key won an Edinburgh Comedy Award for his stand-up and became Alan Partridge’s regular lackey, Sidekick Simon; Basden created the sitcoms *Plebs* and *Here We Go*. Together, the pair made six series of *Tim Key’s Poetry Programme* on Radio 4. (Choice poem: “An ox? An ox? An ox? An ox?! I could barely conceal my incredulity. Why had she bought me an ox?”) But the siren call of *Wallis Island* was rarely far away. The prospect of a film was constantly discussed, often over what

Key describes as a “nostalgic pint”.

Finally, in 2020, and with the pandemic nixing all live shows and filming opportunities, they agreed to see where this particular ballad might take them. “Once we had the idea that Herb was part of a double act, and his love interest was in the double act,” Key recalls, “that was enough to go: ‘Okay, this feels like it could happen.’” *The One And Only Herb McGwyer* suddenly became a three-hander — and with it, the big, beating emotional heart of the film was found.

WHEN CAREY MULLIGAN FIRST

received the script for *The Ballad Of Wallis Island* (emailed directly to her by Key), her husband, folk-rockers Marcus Mumford, begged her to accept immediately. “Before I even read it, Marcus was like, ‘We have to do it!’” recalls Mulligan with a chuckle. (They both profess to be huge fans of *Tim Key’s Poetry Programme*.) “I did say, ‘Can you just calm down for a second? I need to read it first.’”

Thankfully, the script lived up to expectations. “The characters were all so brilliantly drawn,” she says. “I also felt like I just wanted to make something that would be a lovely thing to put into the world.” It was the introduction of Mulligan’s Nell, a character not found in the short film, that gave the feature film its shape: in its fictional, *Spinal Tap*-esque chronology, McGwyer Mortimer were the bestselling folk-rock band of 2014, until Nell and Herb broke up and went their separate ways. Charles’ private gig is the first contact the former lovers have had in a decade — trawling up memories both painful and potent. “It’s the universal themes of love and loss and nostalgia and regret about where you are in your life,” explains Griffiths. “I wanted that island to feel like a transformative space — you go there a bit stuck, and then when you leave, you’re moving on. That’s why Carey’s character is so important — because Nell really knows who she is and is at peace with who she is. It’s Herb who’s projecting his own kind of nostalgia and regret onto her. And Carey is so grounded.”

There was something else going on behind the scenes too, which the filmmakers have only recently realised: a kind of meta-narrative, where this sense of nostalgia has seized them almost as much as their characters. “Herb’s desire creatively to get back to that earlier place is echoed in our process of making the film,” says Griffiths, “because we all wanted to get back to that memory of the joy of making the short film. It’s been quite an emotional creative journey.”

All four of them keep thinking about a key scene midway through the film, in which Herb and Nell finally put aside their differences and play a song together for the first time in a decade, sat across a dinner table with an awestruck, deeply moved



Charles watching on. “There’s definitely a lot of life blending itself with art,” says Key. “My character can’t believe this is happening, but also *I* can’t believe we’re getting the opportunity to make this film, with Carey Mulligan. That does link itself back into the short. There’s definitely a huge emotional attachment.”

Mulligan remembers watching Key’s face while singing during that scene. “Even when the camera was on us, I could see him fighting back tears,” she recalls. “Well, he says he was *trying* to make himself cry. But it was pretty special, either way.” Griffiths reports that during that scene, “everyone was in tears on set, too. It makes me emotional thinking about it now, actually. The whole process was just a joy”.

For Basden, Key and Griffiths — all of whom have worked in darker, more ironic comedic spaces — the chance for a bit of heart-on-sleeve sincerity was too great an opportunity to pass. “On the radio show we do, there is emotion there,” Key says, “but the palette is much more cartoonish. So I feel incredibly lucky to work in this tone. It’s a much more difficult place to get to.”

Finding that gear shift, from puns to pathos, was a tightrope walk. “There was a real balance in editorial of how annoying



Charles is — how he can’t be annoying to an audience,” explains Griffiths. “You’re constantly modulating. The secret, I think, is just to play the truth of the moment. When we see what’s actually happening underneath all of that pun-tastic stream-of-consciousness, there is a real person there, who’s hurting.” The still waters of *Wallis Island*, it turns out, ran deep.



Top to bottom:
A well-refreshed heart to heart; From Wales to whales; Have guitar, will travel.

"I HEARD LAUGHTER," REPORTS

Griffiths of the film's rapturous premiere at the Sundance film festival back in January. "And sobbing." It was not until the film bowed to 1,400 people at the Eccles Theater in Salt Lake City that Key, Basden and Mulligan even saw it for the first time. "I will note that Marcus [Mumford] has never seen [her recent films] *The Dig* or *She Said*, but he *did* fly to Sundance to come and see *The Ballad Of Wallis Island*," Mulligan says with a laugh. "He was very excited."

"There was, amazingly, a standing ovation," recalls Key of the premiere. "I've never had that happen to me in my life. So I was kind of on the brink then, and stayed on the brink for the rest of my time there."

"You fell off the brink a couple of times," offers Basden. "My fingertips were right on the brink," acknowledges Key.

The experience was clearly overwhelming. "We found ourselves crying at times," says Basden. "Very high altitude, for one thing. But I do feel emotional about this film, because the journey of it is very specific — revisiting a time in your twenties, when you were both creatively and personally excited and full of hope. It's what drives the film, but it's also just exactly how I feel when I think about the short. It's a weird

thing that's crept up on us, I think."

Not everything landed in Utah. "There were moments in the film when it played out there where there was suddenly pin-drop silence at a very English reference," chuckles Key. "We should have paused the film to explain what a Calippo was," says Basden. "But it was also just surprising to see Americans really embrace it. It's so British in tone."

After a long journey, the film they always talked about is finally out there in the world. Tie-in merch and a limited-edition vinyl soundtrack LP — recorded in Marcus Mumford's personal studio — will follow. Beyond that? Will it take another 18 years until the next one? "We'd love to make another film," says Key, adding drily: "You know how easy that is to do."

Maybe a feature-length version, *Empire* suggests, of the maze-based short film they made, back in the day? Key sits up. "Actually, I think this could be a big turning point in this interview," he says. "I'd never considered it as a feature, but I think it'd be really interesting. Genuinely. Sometimes it takes *Empire* magazine to just push you there." That's the definition of true friendship: being willing to be stranded on an island *and* trapped in a maze. 🐉

THE BALLAD OF WALLIS ISLAND IS IN CINEMAS FROM 30 MAY

LONELY ISLANDS

Step ashore these sparse cinematic landmasses



THE ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU (1996)

Mad scientist Dr. Moreau (Marlon Brando) has come up with a novel solution for staving off island loneliness: creating grotesque beast-human hybrids to keep him company. "I have almost achieved perfection," Moreau says in the film; critics at the time sadly disagreed.



CAST AWAY (2000)

The modern-day *Robinson Crusoe*, Robert Zemeckis' classic sees FedEx employee Chuck Noland (Tom Hanks) washing up on a desert island. A testament to the well-known truism that the only items required for happiness are a volleyball and a marker pen.



JOURNEY 2: THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND (2012)

An *extreeeeemely* loose adaptation of the Jules Verne novel, depicting a magical place occupied only by Michael Caine and some CG animals. This take on the story sees Caine ride a giant bee and The Rock bounce berries off his pecs — just as Verne intended.



THE RED TURTLE (2016)

This gorgeous Studio Ghibli-produced animation is another shipwreck film set on a William Golding-esque plot of land — only this one features a wordless, nameless man who comes into conflict with, and later falls in love with, a giant turtle. Desert islands will do that to you.

A S K I N G

ALEXANDER SKARSGÅRD HAS ALWAYS BEEN DRAWN TOWARDS ANARCHY: DISRUPTIVE CHARACTERS WHO TURN

WORDS
ALEX GODFREY


RACHELL SMITH

T R O

Alexander Skarsgård,
photographed exclusively
for *Empire* in London on
12 March 2025.

F O R

WORLDS UPSIDE DOWN. NOW, AS HE PLAYS A ROGUE ANDROID IN *MURDERBOT*, WE MEET HIM TO DISCOVER WHAT PUSHES HIS BUTTONS

U B L E



"IS THERE BLOOD IN MY HAIR?" asked Alexander Skarsgård's Eric Northman, having just killed, dismembered and feasted upon some unlucky soul in HBO's vampire saga *True Blood*. For many, the show (2008-2014, RIP) was their first exposure to Skarsgård, who was starting as he meant to go on: anarchic, provocative, and unafraid to play characters with an unhealthy moral compass.

True Blood wasn't quite the start. The son of Stellan Skarsgård, he acted in a few things as a child in Sweden before jacking it in, then appeared in 2001's *Zoolander*, playing a model, Meekus, who gets blown up in a petrol station. After spending a few years in the Hollywood

wilderness, Skarsgård finally broke through as Brad 'Iceman' Colbert in HBO's US Marine mini-series *Generation Kill* (2008); *True Blood* began airing mere weeks later, and he was off to the races, going on to play dubious gentlemen in the likes of David E. Kelley's *Big Little Lies* (physically abusive husband Perry), Robert Eggers' *The Northman* (Viking on a revenge-mission to hell — or, at least, Valhalla), and Brandon Cronenberg's *Infinity Pool* (holidaying author who accidentally kills someone, escaping jail by having a clone of himself get stabbed to death, precipitating a series of clones that each get mentally and brutally pummelled — worst holiday ever).

Now, Skarsgård takes the lead in Chris and Paul Weitz's TV comedy-drama *Murderbot*, in which his privately snarky android finds itself free of corporate enslavement but can't be bothered to do much about it. Photographing the actor last month in London, *Empire* then sat down with him to find out where all this mischief comes from...

A lot of your characters — certainly in *True Blood*, *The Diary Of A Teenage Girl*, *Big Little Lies*, *The Northman*, *Succession* — stir things up. They're provocative. They push at things.

Yeah, some intentionally and some unintentionally. Some characters can be quite naive and childish and plain, but then either transform or are thrown into a situation that they can't handle, and then it spirals into madness and they try to navigate that. It's not something that I've set out to find in projects that I choose, but subconsciously, it's probably true that I'm drawn to characters that, like you said, stir things up a bit.

Yes — even if they're not aware of it, or if it's not voluntary, they are disruptors. And I get the sense that that appeals to you.

Yeah, totally. And... why is that? (*Long pause*) Maybe because I was... steeped in the Swedish culture of conformity, and of following rules and politely waiting in line. Maybe that triggered a kind of... a desire for anarchy.

Well, also — and this goes right back to *Generation Kill* — a lot of your work explores the idea of masculinity, of men's obsession with what they're supposed to be. When there's too much testosterone going around.

There's a lot of adrenaline and testosterone in that character [Brad Colbert] and in *Generation Kill*, but I liked that it wasn't a cliché of a recon Marine. He's very soulful, and he's cerebral, and he is a patriot, but he can also see how fucked up everything is, and he carries a lot of frustration with his superiors and with the system and the bureaucracy. I've never really been interested in characters that are strong and tough. They can be strong and tough, but you want something underneath it. It's got to be something conflicting, or an exploration of why they feel the need to present themselves as strong and tough. That's what's interesting.

You do choose films that unpack that. In *Infinity Pool*, James, a struggling author, gets all the masculinity — and ego — stripped away from him. A defining scene is when Mia Goth's Gabi confesses to never having read his book after all and reads out a bad review to him. It's possibly, in its own way, the most destructive thing that happens to him in that film, which is saying a lot. It really picks at ego. As an actor, I imagine that was something you enjoyed exploring.

Oh, yeah. I love the idea that he's desperately holding on to the notion that he finally found a fan. He can't believe his luck, at the beginning of the movie when she recognises him. She's read his book. She loves the book. She recommends it to her husband, and he's holding on to that throughout the film, throughout the madness of the movie. He's like, "Well, at least she's a fan." Yeah, the sheer vanity of that really intrigued me.

You acted as a child but gave it up when you were 13, because you didn't like the attention you were getting. It feels like there's a throughline between what we're talking about — stories that hold up vanity and ego to the microscope — and your outlook from an early age, of not being interested in that side of things.

Well... I'm quite vain and I have a huge ego. So that might be a bit too flattering of an interpretation of [what happened]. I like the narrative that I was like, "Ego and vanity, not for me. I'm gonna step away from the spotlight." But I think it had more to do with insecurity. This TV film, *Hunden Som Log* — "The Smiling Dog" — came out when I was 13, and suddenly I was not anonymous anymore. People would recognise me on the street, and I would get fan mail, and people would sometimes wait outside our apartment building in Stockholm for autographs. It's a fucking weird age, for anyone, and... it threw me off a bit. It was scary to me. And any kind of attention I would get from girls, I would interpret as, "She's only interested in me because she wants an autograph, or thinks it's cool that I was in that movie." And that gutted my self-confidence a bit, where I felt like, "I don't have much worth. It's just because they've seen me on television." And because I wasn't dead set on becoming an actor, it wasn't a difficult decision. I was like, "I don't think I want to deal with this anymore." And I didn't for many years.

Previous page: Jacket & trousers: 424; T-shirt: Sunspel; Shoes: Jimmy Choo; Socks: Falke.
This page: Bomber jacket & shirt: JW Anderson; Jeans: Agolde





“CHARACTERS CAN BE STRONG AND TOUGH, BUT YOU WANT SOMETHING UNDERNEATH IT.”

Indeed, at 19 you joined the Swedish Navy. Do you think what you experienced there inspired or informed some of the things you’ve been exploring as an actor? Obviously it was a very macho environment.

I was probably drawn to the military, into this specific unit, because it was... maybe a way for me to rebel against my artistic hippie

family, where it was all very bohemian, lots of red wine and cigarettes and conversations about Albert Camus. Also, I was 19 and I had grown up in a very urban environment in Södermalm in central Stockholm. [So] I got to pretend to be James Bond for a year-and-a-half: our job was basically to secure the islands of the archipelago outside of Stockholm against sabotage or terrorist attempts on the island.

There was no patriotic reason for me to join. I didn’t join to protect Sweden or because I liked guns. In terms of masculinity, some of our officers were physically very strong and imposing, but I was more impressed by the more thoughtful, more cerebral officers and fellow soldiers. I admired the ones that didn’t feel the need to show off or look cool. Because it was so obvious to me that the cool guys were the ones

Cardigan: Iris Von Arnim; Vest: CDLP; Jeans: Agolde; Belt: Morjas; Shoes: Jimmy Choo



that he was the best soldier, because he was fucking smart, and *that* made him really cool.

You've also, though, often played characters that are conflicted and confused. In *The Diary Of A Teenage Girl*, *Big Little Lies*, *The Northman*, *Infinity Pool*... they're not really in control of what they're doing. And you find a way of playing them that really gets into the cracks.

That's the most interesting challenge. For example, Perry in *Big Little Lies*: how do you avoid making him clichéd or cartoonish or too much of a Disney villain? When he's remorseful, he's genuinely remorseful. He is madly in love with his wife, and he's a great dad to their twins. That gives the character complexity, and it was important to play those scenes with sincerity, to make it a real character, and someone who's afraid of himself in a way, and what he's capable of. Because without that it'd just be, "Oh, here's the villain of the story."

Is that why *The Northman* appealed to you, too? Because that guy is a mess. Especially after his mum tells him he's got everything all wrong.

Absolutely, yeah. It's a version of *Hamlet*, obviously, and what makes *Hamlet* great is the

Below, top to bottom: Playing Meekus (right), a male model in *Zoolander* (2001); As Sgt Brad 'Iceman' Colbert in TV series *Generation Kill*; Having a fangtastic time as *True Blood*'s Eric Northman.



that *knew* they were cool. They didn't have to show off, because that, to me, was a sign of insecurity. So I don't know if that was the genesis of it, but to this day I feel that way: it's such a sign of insecurity when you're so aware of how others are going to perceive you. There's a relaxed confidence in just knowing that you're the shit. In *Generation Kill*, Brad Colbert wasn't the physically strongest guy, but everyone knew

conflict of character, the friction within the character. And even if you're making a big action movie like *The Northman*, I don't see why you can't have depth, and characters that make you lean in, and have you unsure of who you're rooting for. And so yeah, that's always more interesting.

When I spoke to you about *The Northman* in 2022 you said that, months on from filming it, you were finding it hard to connect with anything else you were being sent. You said, "I feel a bit lost, I don't know where to go from here." Do you remember that feeling? And how did you get over that?

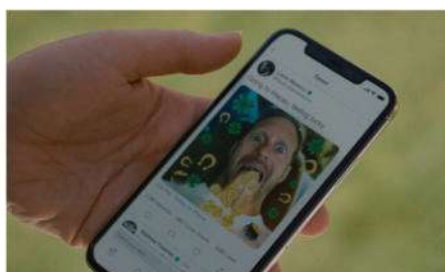
Oh, I remember it vividly. And I don't know how I got over it. If I ever did. (Long pause) No... it was such a monumental undertaking, and it had been eight years from its inception to when we talked. It was the hardest, most gruelling shoot of my life. So once we'd made it through, I felt like, "What do I do now?" I don't think I worked for a little while after that. Like I said in that interview, I was finding it hard to connect when I was sent scripts. I felt a bit... a little catatonic. I was just sitting at home and trying to focus, trying to read stuff and I was just like, "I don't care. I don't know. I don't care." I believe *Succession* was the next thing I did.

That's a cool thing to bring you back.

Succession was fucking amazing. I'd seen the first two seasons, and I'd seen *Peep Show* before that, I was a big fan of Jesse Armstrong and Armando Iannucci, that whole gang, the British comedy royalty. When they reached out, it was supposed to be two episodes. There was no discussion of what would potentially happen in the future, it was just like, this crazy tech guy comes in and... stirs shit up. (Laughs) So that helped me get back on the horse and find some excitement to be back on set, because it was only a few days' work with people that I admire, on the greatest show on television.

And he's another interesting character in terms of what we've been talking about, because he's this ultra-successful tech bro but then he's sending blood bricks to his ex-girlfriend. Crazy man shit.

Yeah. Well, when you're surrounded by yaysayers and sycophants, sometimes you just want to fucking stir shit up and get a reaction. And I think he's also curious to see how people will react if he does or says weird shit.



Clockwise from top left: Playing antagonist Perry Wright in TV series *Big Little Lies*; Amleth is out for revenge in *The Northman* (2022); Being cloned in *Infinity Pool* (2023) to horrifying effect; Playing the lead in new series *Murderbot*; Lukas Matsson phone fun in the award-winning *Succession*; Scientist Nathan Lind in 2021's *Godzilla Vs. Kong*.

As well as all of these idiosyncratic character studies, you've done a handful of huge films — *Battleship*, *The Legend Of Tarzan*, *Godzilla Vs. Kong*. Can you still do what you want to do, character-wise, within the confines of those big productions?

I've had really good creative relationships with all the directors that I've worked with on bigger movies, where they've been very open to creating a playful environment on set. So I've never felt stifled or creatively suffocated. But then the stakes are much higher, so you might have super fun coming up with cool side-stories or weird little aspects of the character, but then, when there's hundreds of millions of dollars at stake, ultimately those eccentricities might not make the final cut.

Yes, it's been speculated that your character in *Godzilla Vs. Kong* was something a little different, going through maybe a rough time, and that didn't end up on screen. What's it like when you're on something like that and a character might change during production?

There was definitely more of a backstory, more character-driven scenes that ended up on the cutting-room floor. But if you sign up to do a movie like *Godzilla Vs. Kong*, there are only two stars of that film. And you're not one of them. Adam Wingard, the director, and I, can play around and come up with weird quirky shit, and add layers of character work. But at the end of the day, if they're gonna cut down the film,

Skarsgård will end up on the floor, not *Godzilla* or *Kong*. (*Laughs*) So I totally get it, and, you know, the movie works. It didn't need more Skarsgård.

In *Murderbot*, you're the lead, and are in more or less every scene for multiple episodes. That character has all this power, it can do whatever it wants but just doesn't. For a while it's just observing what the humans are doing.

Yeah. It can do whatever it wants, the universe is its oyster, but it has to come up with a plan, it can't just take off — because then everyone will know it's rogue, and then they will hunt it down and kill it. So it's like, "Okay, I'm gonna bide my time and wait for the right opportunity." It's not interested in humans, humans are idiots. It's kind of appalled by them, and it's been treated horribly by all its clients up until this moment. But then it ends up on this weird planet with this weird group of humans that are outside the corporate system, and they don't believe in indentured servitude, they want to talk to Murderbot and invite Murderbot in, instead of storing it in the tool shed, like other clients have done, and that freaks Murderbot out. So the story is about how it tries to not engage with the humans, or as little as possible. But they're working so hard to connect with Murderbot that it's starting to chip away at its armour, in a way where it's slowly starting to care about them, which it finds disgusting.

How did you approach that evolution, of portraying a machine that is becoming a bit more human?

Ironically, I found Murderbot more relatable than most characters I've ever played.

Really?

Yeah, I found Murderbot incredibly relatable. There's just a... There's a social awkwardness, or just trying to figure out how to fit into a group.

Is that something you feel?

Well, it's that feeling of walking into a room of strangers and you're trying to read the situation in the room. I don't have social anxiety, but I can definitely relate to the feeling where everything is slightly elevated when you're surrounded by strangers, or you're in a room with a lot of people, and you're trying to figure out what's going on. You're desperately trying to leave the room, but you can't, because you're told to be here.

Is that what it feels like being an actor sometimes, at events?

Yeah. (*Laughs*) Sometimes I feel like an android in those moments, or I just want to pull the ripcord and get out of there. But also in the aspect of having life goals, but then procrastinating. Murderbot talks about having all these cool, fucking awesome adventures and badass stuff, but then... You might be dreaming about that, but then when you finally have a moment where it's presented to you, it's a big step to actually take the first step into that and start executing.

Let's end on *Infinity Pool*, because when we spoke about the film in 2023, you told me that you'd been given one of the clones, and that it was on its way to your house. Did it get there?

It got there. Yeah. It's a version of my head in the red latex.

Where did you put it?

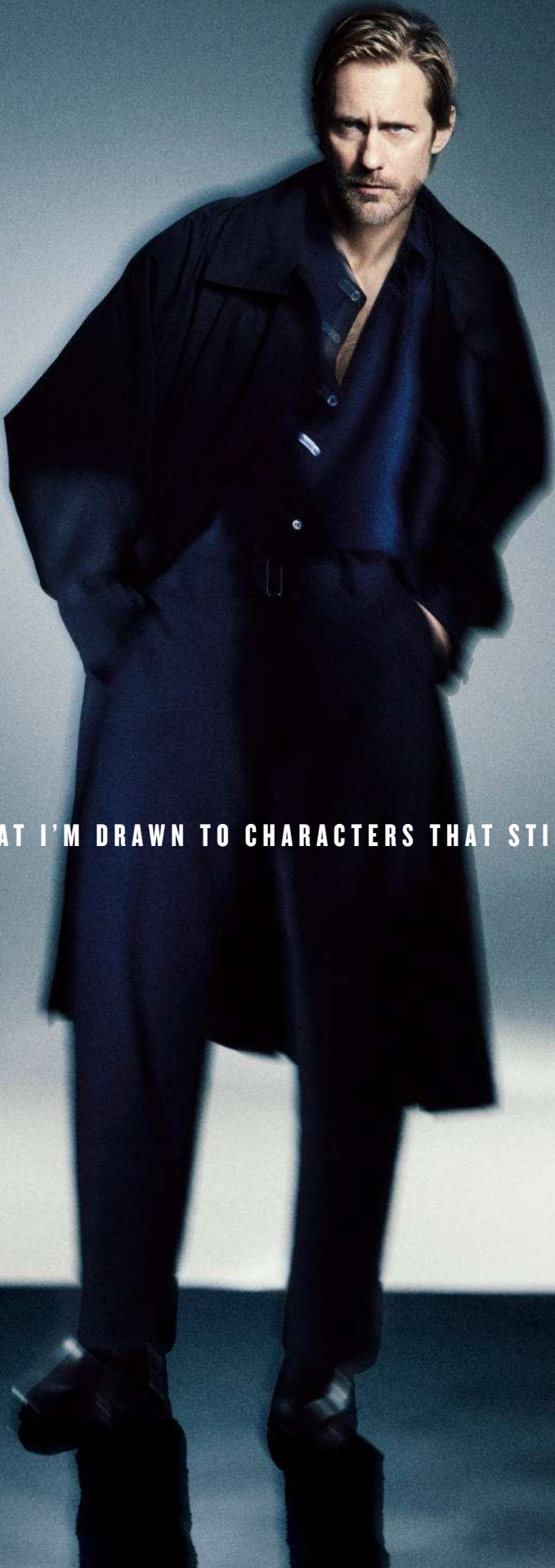
I put it on my coffee table, but surprisingly, it freaked people the fuck out when they came over, so I couldn't keep it there. (*Laughs*) It didn't quite work, because a bunch of my brothers have kids, four or five years old, and it didn't quite fly when there was a very lifelike replica of my face coming out of red goo on the coffee table.

So where is it, in a cupboard?

Yes, it's stored for now. I tried to figure out if I could hang it on a wall somewhere, but it freaks people out, surprisingly. Especially children. So, I'll get back to you on it. Once I find the right spot for it. I mean, I love it. It's my face, I love my face, what can I say? 🤖

MURDERBOT IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM 16 MAY

Photographer's assistants: Cameron
Smith and Ethan Humphries.
Set and props: Propped Up.
Grooming: Charley McEwen at The
Only Agency using Dr Barbara Sturm
and Hair By Sam McKnight.
Styling: Rose Forde at The Wall
Group, assisted by Frankie Martin
and Tilley Sampson.
Tailoring: Mirpuri Bespoke Ltd.



"IT'S TRUE THAT I'M DRAWN TO CHARACTERS THAT STIR THINGS UP A BIT."

MARKING

OVER FIVE FILMS, THE EVER-POPULAR
FINAL DESTINATION SERIES
SERVED UP SOME OF CINEMA'S
MOST INVENTIVE DEATHS YET.
NOW, WITH *BLOODLINES*, IT'S BACK WITH
A BLOODY VENGEANCE

KILLING

WORDS
CHRIS HEWITT





Craig Perry has death on his mind. The home office of the man who produced the *American Pie* series, and other notable movies, is tastefully furnished — posters for exploitation films *Young Sinners*, *Reefer Madness* and *Death Race 2000* hang on the back wall. But right now, all he can see are deathtraps. “I have a library of bookshelves. I know that they’re not particularly attached well, because the drywall is 100 years old,” he says. “So all it takes is a little tremor and they’re going to be mopping me up. And I might get speared with [genre trophy] the Saturn Award, because those things are heavy.” He pauses, looking around to see where else death might lurk. “My threat matrix is constant,” he laughs. “I can’t walk into a room without triangulating how I might die.”

This may seem like unusual behaviour for the man behind Jason Biggs fucking a pie. Until you realise that “other notable movies” also counts a beloved horror franchise which has redefined how many of us see death. Because as the producer of all the *Final Destination* films, Perry has spent the last 25 years making sure death is on *everyone’s* minds.



EVEN IF YOU’VE NEVER SEEN A *FINAL Destination*, you’re probably aware of the premise: a group of people avoid being wiped out in a terrible disaster, only to find themselves being picked off one-by-one in a series of accidents, seemingly set in motion by Death itself, pissed off that they managed to avoid being on its list. Sometimes those accidents take the form of incredibly complicated chain reactions. Sometimes, you get splatted by a bus without warning. Either way, you can’t cheat death. And, somewhere along the way, it became part of our cultural fabric. As Aimee Lou Wood’s Chelsea says in *The White Lotus*, “This could be some *Final Destination* shit!”

“It’s crazy,” laughs Jeffrey Reddick of that reference. “It means a lot to me.”

Reddick is, in many ways, the father of *Final Destination*. The daddy of Death. It all began with him, more than a quarter of a century ago. “I read an article about a woman who was on vacation, and her mother said, ‘Don’t take the flight you’re on tomorrow; I have a bad feeling about it,’” recalls Reddick. “And the plane crashed. So that got the idea in my head. What if she was supposed to die in that crash? What if

she cheated death? And then death started coming after her?”

Reddick, who was then working at New Line Cinema, turned that idea into, of all things, a spec script for *The X-Files*. That screenplay — which features some prime Mulder and Scully banter — is available online, but it never got made. “I never sent it to the show,” says Reddick. “One of my friends at New Line was like, ‘This is a great idea for a movie.’”

So he reworked it as a three-page treatment for ‘Flight 180’, about a group of survivors coming to terms with the fact that they may not be survivors for much longer. As the title suggests, it retained the plane crash that became one of *Final Destination*’s greatest calling cards. But otherwise, it was far removed from its final destination. “It was very *Nightmare On Elm Street*-influenced,” says Reddick. “Death played on their survivor’s guilt until they committed suicide, which was really dark.”

He kept it in-house, taking it to producers Warren Zide and Craig Perry, who had a deal at New Line. “I was like, ‘There’s a movie here for sure,’” says Perry, who offered it to Clive Barker to direct. “It was, ‘Thank you, but it’s not for me.’” Eventually, after a little bit of wrangling, Perry persuaded James Wong and Glen Morgan to write (both) and direct (Wong). And that’s when ‘Flight 180’ really started to get off the ground.



Top to bottom: Death spoils dinner in new outing *Final Destination: Bloodlines*; Valerie Lewton (Kristen Cloke) has a nasty kitchen accident in *Final Destination* (2000); The infamous plane crash from the first film.



IN A COINCIDENCE SO STRANGE IT'S *Final Destination*-worthy, Morgan and Wong had made their name as writers on — yes! — *The X-Files*. They were looking to make the step up to the big screen — Wong as director, Morgan as producer, both as writers — when they heard about Reddick's idea. "It was kind of Death personified," says Morgan. (Reddick says there was an Angel Of Death figure in his version, but only at the behest of New Line.) "We were both like, 'You can't see Death, and you can't beat it.' So we pitched, 'Death's just a force.' And they said, 'Cool!', much to our surprise. But now every Halloween I go, 'We blew it!' There's no costume to buy, there's no action figure."

The cause-and-effect Rube Goldberg-style death traps for which the franchise became

famous was something they introduced. "We landed on the fact that Death is this vicious or sadistic force, and it moves things around us so that [people] can die in a way that's fun and exciting, but also unexpected," says Wong.

In truth, though, the most complex death is that suffered by Mrs Lewton, a teacher played by Kristen Cloke, aka Morgan's wife, who gets broken glass in her throat, is stabbed by her own kitchen knife, and then burned along with her own house. "Jim and I have killed her a lot," laughs Morgan. Otherwise, the deaths in *Final Destination* are, for the most part, short, sharp shocks. A teenager gets snared in a shower cord, making it look like a suicide. A piece of debris chops off the head of Seann William Scott (this definitely never happened in the *American Pie* movies). The most memorable death sees Amanda Detmer's Terry hit by a bus a split-second after telling her fellow survivors to "drop fucking dead".

"We didn't want to do the same deaths every time," says Wong, who is fully aware that the bus literally comes out of nowhere, and couldn't possibly have taken that corner at that speed. "What can I say when something works?" he laughs. "You don't ask any questions."

But the big daddy of all the deaths in the movie is the plane crash. Hence the title. Reddick gives the credit to a friend of his, Brett Leitner: "He goes, 'What about 'Final Destination'? They say that when [they] land a plane, and that's the end of your life.'" And the crash set the template for all the movies that would follow: start with a showstopper. The opening, in which Devon Sawa's Alex Browning has a premonition of his plane, Flight 180, exploding in flames, remains one of the most terrifying plane crashes committed to celluloid. "We had the cameras on bungees so they wouldn't have to move the same way the set

did," says Wong, who shot it practically on a giant set in Vancouver. "That meant gravity was in place. Anything that was not bolted down, you could see it physically move. That gave it the reality of the plane diving before it crashed."

When *Final Destination* opened in 2000 it became a sleeper hit, winding up with over \$112 million worldwide. "It just kept playing," recalls Perry. "It wasn't just a horror movie for horror fans. It had a heady idea, and it wasn't so reductive as a guy with a knife running after teenagers." Never mind that the film had the word "final" in the title: sequels were demanded. And sequels were delivered.



"HONESTLY, EVERYONE SAYS TO ME, 'Glen Morgan, I'll never drive behind a truck with logs again,'" says, in case you hadn't guessed, Glen Morgan. "I go, 'Thanks, but that's not me. That's David Ellis.'"

After completing *Final Destination*, Morgan and Wong moved on to their underrated Jet Li/Jason Statham multiverse action movie *The One*. So when it came to creating 2003's *Final Destination 2* (aka 'Oxymoronic Boogaloo'), Perry turned to David R. Ellis, a respected second-unit director and stuntman. His task: pull off the extraordinary opening accident, a freeway pile-up which sees a bunch of characters crushed, crunched and cooked after a logging lorry sheds its load. "I came up with that idea [when I was] driving behind a log truck, going home to visit family in Kentucky," says Reddick, who got story credit on the sequel, the last thing he sold before leaving New Line. "But I have to give David Ellis credit for directing that, because he was a stunt man. He just went hog wild with it."

Ellis, who died in 2013, spent a week shooting the sequence just outside Vancouver. "We knew we were in very good hands," says Perry. "We had a five-mile stretch of highway that hadn't been used yet. We had hundreds of picture cars. It was a massive operation to pull off."

Morgan and Wong returned for 2006's *Final Destination 3* (aka 'The One With The Rollercoaster, And A Young Mary Elizabeth Winstead'), which boasts one of the greatest match cuts in cinema history, from a shot of two burning sunbeds — which have just claimed the lives of two young women — to their coffins. "That was in the script," says Wong, modestly. "The walls of the tanning place had to be high enough to get the camera to match where the coffins were going to be." Perry is less circumspect about that moment's majesty. "Kubrick is a hack!" he cackles.

Ellis then came back in 2009 for *The Final Destination*, aka 'The One With The Race Car Accident'. Apart from a few inventive kills, it's the one true disappointment in a series with a pretty high batting average. "It wasn't the strongest entry for a multitude of reasons," admits Perry. "It just doesn't have the same sense of energy and precision."

The intention was that *The Final Destination* would be, literally, the final part.



Top to bottom:

Death by sun bed in *Final Destination 3* (2006); Going hog wild with the log lorry in *Final Destination 2*; Engagement ring agony in *Final Destination: Bloodlines*.





Top to bottom: At the car wash, yeah, in *The Final Destination* (2009); Ballet dancer Candice Hooper (Ellen Wroe) hits the deck in *Final Destination 5* (2011); Molly (Emma Bell) should have taken the subway (*Final Destination 5*).



That turned out not to be the case, and not just because it became the highest-grossing movie in the series, taking in \$186 million. They wanted to go out on a high. “We thought, ‘If we never make another movie in this franchise, five would be a nice coda,’” says Perry.

Which it was. Steven Quale’s *Final Destination 5* (2011) (aka ‘The One With The Bridge Collapse’) had a belter of an ending, in which its heroes, having finally dodged Death’s design, board a plane. But not just any old plane. It’s Flight 180, revealing that the movie was, in fact, a prequel. “That ending just blows people’s minds,” says Perry.

Getting trapped in an endless loop seemed like a perfect way to end the franchise. And, for 14 years, that “final” actually seemed final.

But you can’t shut out Death forever.



JON WATTS HAS DEATH ON HIS MIND. “I think I’ve got a pretty safe room,” he tells *Empire*. He looks around from where he’s talking to us via Zoom. Assesses his threat matrix. His brow furrows. “I have a sword from the second *Spider-Man*,” he says. “The sword would probably

get me. You probably shouldn’t have a sword when you’re doing press for *Final Destination*.”

That Watts, the director of the MCU *Spider-Man* trilogy, is doing press for a *Final Destination* movie at all is something of a surprise. Yet, in his role as producer of *Final Destination: Bloodlines*, the first entry in the franchise for nearly 15 years, that is exactly what is happening. Largely because he’s had death on his mind ever since he saw the original. “I was a freshman at film school,” he says. “I love *Final Destination*. It’s one of the best ideas in the horror genre ever. And the second one was the one that really blew me out of the water. That opening sequence is as good as some of the best *Hitchcock*.”

Perry hadn’t filed away *Final Destination* with a DNR notice. He was always open to resurrecting the series. “But we couldn’t quite figure out the best way to do it,” he says. A couple of years ago, hoping to connect with a “*Final Destination* nerd”, he reached out to Dianne McGunigle, who was then a manager, to see if any of her clients might be interested in reviving the series. “She said, ‘I got the biggest nerd of all time, and I married him.’” That was Watts, who came on board with McGunigle. “*Final Destination 4* was one of our first date nights,”

laughs Watts. “We accidentally saw it in D-BOX. Your chair is shaking for 20 minutes, you’re spilling your drink and popcorn is flying everywhere. It was a very memorable first date.”

Watts insists he was never going to direct *Bloodlines*. “I don’t want the responsibility of doing it,” he says. “I just want to write the story and go away.” He came up with the story, and started to look for new directing blood. He found it. Almost literally.

“We knew we had to do something to give them the experience of what it’ll be like to watch our *Final Destination* movie,” says Zach Lipovsky, who, with his directing partner Adam B. Stein, put together a pitch with a twist. Their solution: a seemingly innocuous Zoom call that went full *Final Destination*, complete with Stein getting decapitated by a ceiling fan. “He fell headless out of the frame,” laughs Lipovsky. “Then I came back in and asked if anyone had any questions.” Watts had one question. Essentially, “When can you start?”

“I can’t believe how well it worked,” admits Watts. “They really sold it. It really escalated to the point where everyone on the Zoom was screaming. It was fantastic.”

Job secured, Lipovsky and Stein now had the onerous task of making a *Final Destination* movie that felt at once familiar and also fresh and surprising. So, *Bloodlines* starts off with a major disaster, set in a rooftop restaurant. Familiar. But it’s also set in 1969. Fresh, surprising. And then it takes a massive time-jump, setting its story in motion as Death catches up with the last survivor of that massacre. Except, in the interim, an entire bloodline has been established, of people who should not be alive. “I love the rules of *Final Destination*,” says Watts. “The thing that hasn’t really been explored yet is the idea of family. A whole branch of a family tree would have to go because the whole thing was tainted.”

The film’s teaser trailer shows, essentially, a kill, as tattoo artist Erik (Richard Harmon) gets Rube Goldberged in his own parlour. It shows an innate understanding of the appeal of the franchise. People don’t go to *Final Destination* movies to improve themselves. They go to *Final Destination* movies to see idiots getting their nose-rings snagged on a ceiling fan. “Death is so clever,” says Stein. “So we came at the Death sequences with a sense of irony to them, that plays with the audience as well.”

If *Bloodlines* hits like a speeding bus, you would imagine that the plan is for the franchise to continue. Watts declares that “it’s an evergreen idea. It’s such a great concept that I think it can live forever”. But Perry is adopting a wait-and-see attitude. “Listen, I would love to milk this cow until it’s a desiccated husk out in the field,” he says. “But you can’t presume you’re going to be given the right to do another one.”

Good idea. With a franchise like this, it’s best to play it by ear. Don’t plan too far ahead. Just in case Death has you on its mind. 🦋

FINAL DESTINATION: BLOODLINES IS IN CINEMAS FROM 14 MAY

final cut



A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

JUNE 2025 | EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT

Bringing out the dead

DIRECTOR ROBERT EGGERS LOOKS BACK ON HIS UNEXPECTED HORROR HIT, NOSFERATU

WORDS ALEX GODFREY

"HERE WE CAN see the dogs eating the dead horse," points out Robert Eggers on his *Nosferatu* commentary. "It's a nice detail."

This is Eggers in a nutshell. The grim everyday visuals. The passion for accuracy. The deadpan delivery. Among other things, *Nosferatu*'s home-entertainment release includes the extended cut (it's four minutes longer), and Eggers' accompanying unpacking. It's great to have it all, when such extras are few and far between these days. "Well, I didn't go to film school, and commentaries and special features were a lot of how I learned how to make movies," he explains to *Empire*. "I think it's important to do."

It's his final bit of work on a film (his fourth, after *The Witch*, *The Lighthouse* and *The Northman*) that has been in the works for decades; no use in cutting corners now, for the version that will exist forever. Eggers' take on F.W. Murnau's folklore interpretation of *Dracula* was a hit, making \$180 million at the box office — a great haul for a film about an abusive rotting corpse — and was acclaimed by everyone from young goths to old masters like Martin Scorsese, who recently said it was amazing ("There's no way that can't make you feel good," says Eggers). So, as the director bids farewell to Orlok, we sit down with him to close the coffin for good.

Last time we met in London, you'd been doing *Nosferatu* press all day, and when you walked in you said, "Moustache, moustache, moustache, moustache, moustache." As in, you'd been asked about Orlok's moustache all day. Were you surprised that that element was such a big deal for people?

Yeah. I mean, I get that. It's a hard pill for some people to swallow. But I also don't care, because there's just no *fucking* way that this guy

wouldn't have a moustache. But I get it. I love the way Max Schreck looks too [in Murnau's original], and it's a change. So, fair play, as people say over here.

There's a scene in the extended cut with Willem Dafoe's Von Franz and Aaron Taylor-Johnson's Friedrich having this intense tit for tat. You say on the commentary that Von Franz keeps trying to get the last word in, but you dialed it down a bit because it was on the verge of getting a bit Mel Brooks. Was that something you kept on your shoulder, ensuring that the film didn't veer into pastiche?

Mel Brooks' *Dracula: Dead And Loving It* was very helpful, because it points out all the absurdities in the things that don't work in this story. So I was very consciously trying to find



Above: Bill Skarsgård vampires up as the monstrous Nosferatu.

Left: Robert Eggers directs a supine Lily-Rose Depp as Skarsgård looks on.

solves for the most egregious things that come up in various tellings of *Dracula*. But yeah, it was just so much fun to write dialogue for Dafoe's character that sometimes it got out of hand.

Ellen (Lily-Rose Depp) is so mentally and physically repressed, by everyone around her, all trying to keep her in her place. Orlok (Bill Skarsgård) represents the opposite of that. He's been abusing her since she was a kid, but sees something in her that no-one else does. She's drawn to him, and is repelled by the fact that she's drawn to him. What was it like for you writing all of that, taking into consideration how carefully one must tread with such subject matter? Did it weigh heavy on your soul?

Yeah. But I think that what enables me to do it, in a way that I hope makes it work, is just sticking ›

to the confines of the period. I think if it were a contemporary film and I was dealing with the same kinds of issues, it would be much more complicated to not fuck it up. And it's easier for me and perhaps, hopefully, more effective to certain audience members, to explore this subject matter [in the context of] supernatural vampires.

There are certainly many different layers at play. Orlok visits Ellen one night, and he's standing there in his big cloak, holding his sash. On the commentary, you half-joke that he's trying to look dashing for his lady. And it is funny.

That choice actually comes down to Bill. He was always asking me, "When is he feeling uncomfortable? When is he feeling jealous?" So when we were blocking that scene on set, he was like, "What do you think about this? His hand here? Trying to look, you know..." And I was like, "Yeah, I like that. It's good."

Because even this centuries-old, abusive dead monster has this little ego and insecurities. He wants this woman to fancy him.

Yeah. *(Laughs)*

Did you have an intimacy coordinator on set? Because this film is not business as usual in that department: you have this monstrous demon having sex with this woman. That's a whole different level of intimacy and choreography.

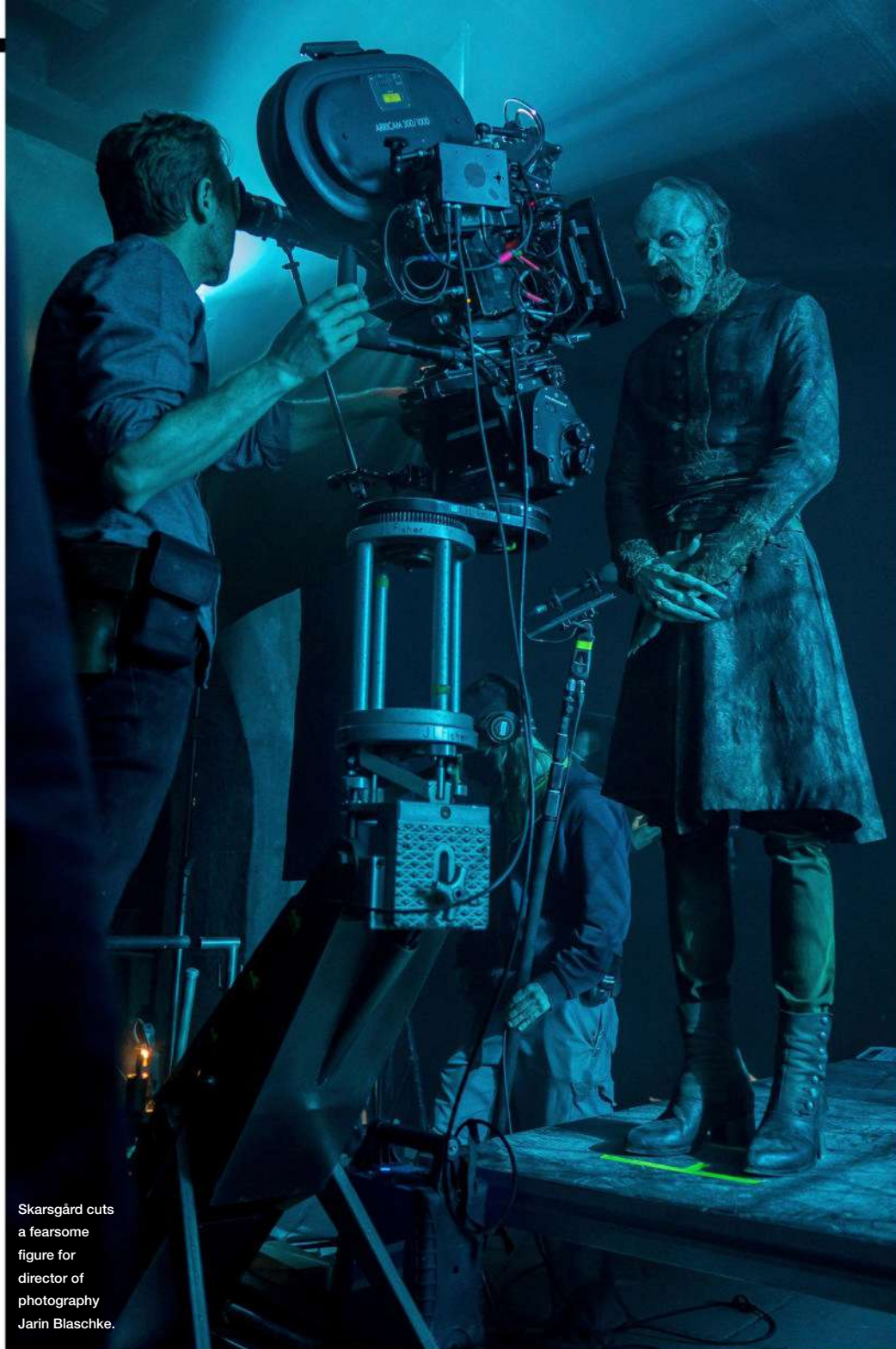
Our intimacy coordinator, Bronagh [McAuley], is great. I worked with her on *The Northman* too. A good intimacy coordinator wants to help you tell the story, and to make sure that everyone is comfortable doing that. A good intimacy coordinator has the imagination to be like, "Okay, we're sensually caressing cavities in a corpse's back, okay, that's something we're gonna do. Cool."

Yes, it's not the usual thing an intimacy coordinator has to deal with.

No. But... *(Laughs)* you gotta keep things interesting, right?

In terms of the themes, the repression and sexuality and abuse, since the film has been out there, have you had feedback from people who that has really resonated with?

Yeah, I've had positive feedback with it resonating for people about... well, how personal it is, I can't speak to that. There is a lot going on with Ellen and Orlok, and going back to your earlier question, something that was on my mind very much was that... There's a lot of feminist literary criticism talking about the trope in 19th-century fiction of sexualised female characters needing to die at the end of the novel, to be punished for their transgressions — unconsciously punished by the male authors. And so here I am, potentially, being a post-Victorian male author and doing



Skarsgård cuts a fearsome figure for director of photography Jarin Blaschke.

the same thing. But there's also a lot of feminist literary criticism that points out that this archetype of this female who understands the other side of repressed 19th-century society and has a window into it, she is the saviour of society. And so as much as maybe these male authors couldn't handle that, or whatever the fuck, society couldn't handle it, it was clearly reconstellating over and over again, because of its need to speak to this repressed period. And so that was something that, in the writing process, gave me perhaps some more confidence to pursue what I was pursuing.

Bill told me that he'd never played anything this evil before, and never wanted to again.

"You gotta keep things interesting, right?"



Left: Hoult, Eggers and Skarsgård on set. Below: Ellen confronts her demon.



Left, top to bottom: An exposed Thomas Hutter (Nicholas Hoult); Cold comfort for Von Franz (Willem Dafoe) and Ellen (Depp); Skarsgård gets ready for his close-up; Not your ordinary bodice-ripper.

It upset him. Did you feel that from him, when you wrapped?

I mean, I couldn't find him when we wrapped. I said, "Cut," and Bill fucking disappeared! (Laughs) So, yeah, he was definitely ready to get out of there.

There's a great shot in the extended cut of the shadow of Orlok's hand stretching over Ellen and Nicholas Hoult's Hutter when they're lying on the floor. On the commentary you explain that you cut it because of feedback from test screenings where people said there was too much of Orlok's shadow, but that you think maybe you shouldn't have cut it. Are test screenings important for you in terms of how audiences might receive the film?

Test screenings are important, as are friends-and-family screenings, just for getting the movie out there, getting it on its feet, getting people to watch it and understand what's working, what's not working. The thing that I don't like about test screenings is when studios get really obsessed about the numbers, because it's not enough data for it to be empirical evidence of anything. This didn't happen with Focus [Features], but when studios get stuck on the numbers, which can happen, that's when this is a fucking nightmare. But as far as getting people to watch a film, it's great. And when 85 per cent of the people say there's too much shadow, I don't know, maybe there's too much shadow. On the other hand, when all the VFX are done and the music's done and the pace is right, I think probably that shot could have been in there, but at the time, it did feel like I was going overboard with the shadow.

It's great, though, and it's there now.

Yeah, and also in terms of why it might have been fine if I'd kept it — the final music cue where the shadow creeps up the stairs and opens the door and all that shit, when the film was previewed it wasn't finished; it didn't have the kind of tension that it has now. Maybe just that alone would have made it feel different. That's the other thing that's so frustrating about previews: the movie's not done.

You and the cast did some press photos on a staircase at St. Pancras Renaissance Hotel. Did you see that people noticed it was exactly where the Spice Girls' 'Wannabe' video was shot?

I sure did, yes. I wasn't aware, but [at the time] Emma Corrin and, I think, Aaron Taylor-Johnson were mentioning it while we were getting the pictures taken.

Well, that video is iconic to some people. Yes. (Laughs)

There was generally an amazing response to the film. It's by far your biggest hit at the

box office — has that changed things in terms of what has come your way since, and what happens next?

Yes. But we'll see how it all pans out. I'm excited that I'm already working on the next one, getting it up on its feet.

Is that *Werwolf*?

Yeah, unless something totally fucking crazy happens.

***Nosferatu* was a lifelong obsession — have you always been fascinated by werewolves and werewolf movies too?**

Yeah. I mean, nothing is going to be *Nosferatu*, as far as personal attachment [goes], but yeah, werewolves have been an important monster as well. And it's kind of a unique genre. The finest werewolf movie is a comedy, which is kind of interesting. One thing I would actually like to say about *Werwolf* is... I don't know who leaked what, but it's been said and been interpreted as an official statement that [the dialogue of the] movie is in Old English. But obviously, because of the period [the 13th century] it's set in, it's Middle English, and I would just like to be clear on that.

All of your films are set in very specific time periods, steeped in history, and you've always been so immersed in the research and the writing and the production, the detail. What residue remains with you? What stays in your head?

I mean, they're all things that I care about, so... I will read an article about a new Viking archaeological find. And I will go to a witchcraft museum. I'm still interested in all this stuff. There is only so much room I can have with things that I'm writing; two to three things can only fit in there at a time without everything getting jumbled. But I mean, I've written another medieval movie that hasn't been made.

'The Knight'?

Yeah. But also, I know a ton about Viking Age farming and a ton about Tudor and Stuart farming. So even without the research into the medieval farming, which I'm still doing anyway, I have a good foothold in it.

In February you went to London's Prince Charles Cinema to present *The Witch*, which had premiered at Sundance ten years earlier. Are you nostalgic like that? What did it mean to you, to introduce your debut film a decade on?

It was pretty extraordinary and humbling. And to have that crowd be so enthusiastic to see it, it was cool. And yeah, the movie changed my life.

I assume you didn't stay in there and watch it again.

No. No, thank you. (Laughs)

NOSFERATU IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND 4K UHD

Moana Better Blues

MOANA 2 DIRECTORS
DAVID G. DERRICK JR AND
JASON HAND ON THE
SEA-SET SEQUEL'S SONGS

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

WHEN *MOANA 2*'S three directors — Dana Ledoux Miller, Jason Hand and David G. Derrick Jr — started work on the Disney+ show that would then transmogrify into the billion-dollar-grossing movie, they were faced with a challenge, musically speaking. The first *Moana*, which came out in 2016, boasted a soundtrack written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, featuring catchy tunes like the Dwayne Johnson-led 'You're Welcome' and the Oscar-nominated 'How Far I'll Go'. But this time around, the trio weren't read their Miranda rights. So they drafted in two new songwriters, Emily Bear and Abigail Barlow, to craft the songs that would accompany Moana (Auli'i Cravalho) on her journey. "Yes, we didn't have Lin," says Derrick. "But when we talked to Emily and Abigail, we realised these are two young artists who can understand what Moana is going through in a way that none of us actually could." Here, Derrick and Hand talk us through the key songs.

'WE'RE BACK'

A jaunty, Miranda-esque ditty that is the film's true opener, after a brief musical intro, reintroducing Moana and her family after that eight-year absence.

Hand: The very first song we ever heard was 'We're Back'. When we heard the first demo, we all felt instantly that they [Bear and Barlow] could write in the voice of this film.

Derrick: It's largely the same song [as that demo].

Hand: We might have adjusted certain things. But it was a welcome back, sonically, to this world.

'BEYOND'

The film's big emotional number, co-written with returning composer Opetia Foa'i, in which Moana looks to the journey ahead (searching for a mythical island) and questions her ability to pull it off.

Hand: The song was written for the end of the film, for the big moment of swimming down to the island. We had a different song up front called 'Two Pieces Of Me' that didn't quite land where Moana's head was at. We had the answer in the wrong place. So we took 'Beyond' and put

it up front. It was speaking to the journey she's about to go on. And we changed some of the lyrics to really emphasise the story point.

Derrick: Where it's placed in the film, it has to hit home the thematic for the entire story, and really set the table for Moana's growth. She has to go beyond what is comfortable.

'WHAT COULD BE BETTER THAN THIS?'

As Moana sets sail with a brand-new crew, this number introduces her, and us, to her fresh shipmates, including a show-stopping rap delivered incredibly quickly and at maximum deadpan by Rose Matafeo.

Hand: We were huge fans of Rose. We only envisioned her, whether we knew she could do this rap or not. She was so concerned about it when we sent it to her, but she kills it.

Derrick: My favourite part about doing the recordings with Rose was that she was always in England, at Abbey Road. We were remote [in LA], but for us, as music fans, we were geeking out.

'GET LOST'

Stylistically the biggest departure, as the film's ostensible villain, the bat-lady Matangi, dominates a disco-style number in which she gives useful advice like "You gotta enjoy the thrill of livin' dangerously" to Moana.

Derrick: We knew once we went inside the clam, like in the first film, it gives you permission to do something a little different, to bring in new sounds.

Hand: That idea that we can have a sonic vibe that's so different than the rest of the film makes

Top to bottom:
Moana knows the way; Pondering her journey in 'Beyond'; 'What Could Be Better Than This?'; Matangi styles out 'Get Lost'.





Top right: An energised Moana. Below: Maui wonders, 'Can I Get A Chee Hoo?'. Bottom: Maui sings to a stricken Moana in 'Mana Vavau.'



you feel like you're far away from her home, actually. And the performance by Awhimai Fraser is incredible. When my wife heard that for the first time, it was like, "Repeat." I hear it at work, then I go home and hear it at home.

'CAN I GET A CHEE HOO?'

The 'You're Welcome' equivalent, a solo song for Dwayne Johnson's demigod Maui that incorporates his catchphrase and elements of a Rocky-style training-montage theme to give Moana, then at a low ebb, some much-needed inspiration.

Hand: We 100 per cent set out with the idea of wanting to have Maui singing as infectious and braggadocious and over-the-top a song as we could possibly make. But 'You're Welcome' is really about, 'Everybody needs to be reminded of how great I am.' This is about Maui saying, 'You have all the goods. You need to believe in yourself.' It's an answer to 'You're Welcome', but in a much different place.

Derrick: That one was a journey. It took many different iterations to find the sweet spot for the story, for the character, for Dwayne.

'MANA VAVAU'

A short song, but the most emotional in the movie, as Moana — who has just died after making a heroic effort to find and revive the lost island of Motufetu — is brought back to life by a plea to the gods from Maui, and her ancestors, including another wayfinder whose singing voice is provided by Foa'i.

Derrick: That was always Maui's song to sing. Samoan is the language he's singing. Emily and Abigail have written so many of the songs, but 'Mana Vavau' is Opie's. For him, it was intensely personal. It's really acknowledging the sacrifice of Moana and imploring, pleading for aid. It was very important for Opetaia that it was written in Samoan. Part of Dwayne's cultural roots come directly from Samoa, and [Foa'i] would grab me all the time and say, "I want to make sure Dwayne can say this correctly, because it's not just for him — it's for his ancestors and all the Samoans out there."

Hand: When you hear Gramma Tala (*the character voiced by Rachel House*) come into it, I cry every time I hear that. It's a very powerful thing.

'WE KNOW THE WAY'

The one Miranda tune in the movie, this reprise of a song from the first movie ends Moana 2, and gives vocal duties this time to Cravalho herself.

Hand: The great thing was having Auli'i sing it. Her taking the mantle of the future of the people is the idea. "We know the way", and now she's the one leading that charge forward. It felt so right and connected to the first film that she sing that song.

MOANA 2 IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL AND DISNEY+



THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Downfall

OLIVER HIRSCHBIEGEL'S SEARING
PORTRAIT OF HITLER'S FINAL DAYS

WORDS **DAN JOLIN**

WHEN NEW “ADULT entertainment” channel More4 launched in October 2005, one of the first movies it aired was Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Downfall*. The advert it ran presented an image of Swiss actor Bruno Ganz as Adolf Hitler, standing outside the concrete-slab entrance to the Berlin bunker where, ten days after his 56th birthday in April 1945, Hitler put a gun in his mouth and blew his brains out, while the city above was pummelled to rubble by Russian artillery. Ganz's Hitler looked hunched and weary yet coldly defiant, his eyes shadowed by the peak of his eagle-festooned cap, with that horribly iconic brush moustache sitting above a sour, downturned mouth. And splashed in large letters across his chest was the channel's own tag line: “It's a happy ending. He dies.”

This was consciously glib and deliberately provocative, but speaks to one way Hirschbiegel's Oscar-nominated film was received: as pure, uncut *schadenfreude*. After all, its *dramatis personae* are characters who, to varying degrees of commitment, are Nazis — and its narrative follows their descent into defeat, dissolution and death. There is undoubtedly some grim satisfaction in watching Ganz's Führer flail ineffectively at his subordinates when reality intrudes on his arrogant-to-the-end self-belief, or shuffling sadly around the cramped, harshly lit passageways of his subterranean HQ holding a palsied hand behind his back.

But, as is often the case, it's more complicated than that. Sure, Hitler rages, melts down and spits venom — most famously in the map-room scene at 37 minutes in, which has become an endlessly re-subtitled parodic meme, probably more widely seen than the film itself. But he is also seen being considerate and avuncular to his young secretaries, particularly Alexandra Maria Lara's Traudl Junge (whose memoir *Until The Final Hour* was a key source, alongside Joachim Fest's book *Inside Hitler's Bunker*). We hear people crack jokes about him being a teetotal vegetarian. At one point we even see him cry.

The final weeks of Hitler's life had been dramatised before, in the Alec Guinness-starring *Hitler: The Last Ten Days* (1973), and the Anthony Hopkins-fronted *The Bunker* (1981). There was an earlier German-made take, too, with G.W. Pabst's *The Last Ten Days* in 1956 — the last time

a German film had given Hitler a central role. But none felt so challengingly intimate as *Downfall*, conceived and written by veteran German producer Bernd Eichinger (*The Name Of The Rose*, *Last Exit To Brooklyn*), who grew up “in the shadow of these events” and had wrestled with making a film about the Nazi era for two decades. His movie felt daring — even taboo-busting — in the way Ganz laid the Führer bare and offered, as the actor put it, “a closer look” at someone who, from *The Great Dictator* to *Jojo Rabbit* via *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS*, has usually been portrayed as a clown or a monster. Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw, for one, was deeply impressed. “This portrayal by Ganz is Hitler much as I envisaged him,” he wrote in 2004. “It is chillingly authentic.”

Both Ganz and Hirschbiegel admitted to hesitating when approached to make the film; the former said friends advised him against it. But the actor found it too “fascinating” a challenge to resist, while the director said he felt an obligation, as a German, to show Hitler “as he was” and explore how the German people “could

have plumbed such depths”. Production was split between exterior work on the streets of St Petersburg (ironically, *Downfall* is a German-Russian co-production) and, in Bavaria Studios, a claustrophobic recreation of the Führerbunker, which was constructed without removable walls to make it more realistically confined, as Hirschbiegel's handheld cameras roamed.

It proved a sombre, oppressive shoot. There were days, Ganz confessed, when it got too much. Such as the scene where we see “Uncle Hitler” dandling one of the Goebbels' daughters on his knee while she and her siblings trill a patriotic song... Not long before the children will be poisoned in their drugged sleep by their mother (Corinna Harfouch), who's determined her Aryan brood are “too good” for a world without National Socialism — surely one of modern cinema's most disturbing sequences. “What happened was awful,” said Ganz. “You just want to run away.” But he stuck it out and gives the definitive portrayal of the Nazi leader. Even if Ganz's incredible success was a double-edged dagger.



PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

Clockwise from main: Adolf Hitler (Bruno Ganz) and ally Albert Speer (Heino Ferch); Traudl Junge (Alexandra Maria Lara); Magda Goebbels (Corinna Harfouch); Peter Kranz (Donevan Gunia) and Junge. **Bottom right:** Pierce Brosnan in *Nomads*.



Downfall's humanisation of Hitler drew much criticism on its release in 2004. As did the way it presents a few high-ranking Nazis in an arguably heroic light, not least SS Obersturmbannführer Ernst-Günther Schenk (Christian Berkel), who refuses to flee Berlin and, as a doctor, assists with emergency field surgery during the regime's final hours. Traudl herself is virtually exonerated by the final image of her escaping to freedom on a bicycle, alongside an implicitly redeemed Nazi Youth tank-buster (Donevan Gunia). The majority of German civilians, meanwhile, are shown as victims, left to die, while their glorious cult-leader snarls that their evident weakness makes them undeserving of survival. Writing in *The New Republic*, American-Israeli diplomat Michael B. Oren claimed the film "absolves the German people of any moral culpability for perpetrating World War II and destroying European Jewry".

Yet by emphasising the suffering of everyday Berliners alongside the intimately and sometimes surreally textured portrayal of the Führer and his followers within the bunker, *Downfall* makes

an important and still timely point. Demagogues rise not because they are hell-spawned monsters, but because they are human beings whom people can relate to and venerate with cult-like devotion — or mistakenly dismiss with jokes and 'it couldn't happen here' shrugs. And when demagogues rise, the very people who helped elevate them ultimately themselves suffer, due to the same absence of empathy that led to the vilification of others in their society. The downfall here isn't just experienced by Hitler and his cronies, but everybody who enabled their regime. Only by learning from that will we truly have a happy ending.

DOWNFALL IS OUT NOW ON DVD AND BLU-RAY



1 ANORA

(OUT 5 MAY, 4K BR)

"*Anora* uses the F-word 479 times. That's three more than the record set by Karla Sofía Gascón's publicist," quipped Conan O'Brien at the Oscars. Now you can relive each one, and the rest of the award-laden drama, in the comfort of your own home thanks to this F-ing marvellous Criterion release.

2 NIGHT MOVES

(OUT 28 APRIL, BR)

Come for Gene Hackman slugging off Eric Rohmer films — "It was kind of like watching paint dry," his PI quips — stay for one of the sharpest noirs of the 1970s. Not to mention one of the late Hackman's greatest performances.

3 HARD TRUTHS

(OUT 21 APRIL, DVD, BR, DIGITAL)

"Cheerful, grinning people. Can't stand them." Whether sofa-shopping or parking her car, Pansy is a total nightmare, one of the crankiest characters ever put on screen. Yet thanks to Marianne Jean-Baptiste's pin-sharp acting and Mike Leigh's empathetic storytelling, this grouch becomes someone you slowly come to understand, and maybe even like.

4 DEMOLITION MAN

(OUT 21 APRIL, 4K BR)

Over 30 years on, this sly Sly satire remains our boggle. As Stallone's burly cop wakes up in a politically correct future, to find his tough ways have gone extinct, it becomes both a canny deconstruction of one-man-army movies, and an action spectacular to satisfy anyone's inner John Spartan.

5 NOMADS

(OUT 26 MAY, BR)

Before he unleashed the Predator on a jungle and Bruce Willis on a skyscraper, John McTiernan made his directing debut with this moody arthouse curio. Pierce Brosnan is a French (!) anthropologist haunted by mischievous Inuit ghosts — over 93 minutes, he gets both shaken and stirred.



The Ranking

Gene Hackman movies

FOUR *EMPIRE* WRITERS PAY TRIBUTE
TO AN ACTING LEGEND



RUSSELL MOORCROFT

OUR CRITICS



CHRIS HEWITT

Claims to be ruler of Australia.



PHIL DE SEMLYEN

Has never picked his feet in Poughkeepsie.



CHRISTINA NEWLAND

She's so cool, when sheep go to bed, they count her.



JAMIE GRAHAM

Named his dog for Hackman. Gene, not Rankin Fitch.

Chris: So, we've lost Gene Hackman. My favourite actor, and for me, the greatest actor of all time. He could make bad films watchable, good films great, and great films all-timers.

Phil: I feel like he's the greatest American actor of the last half-century or more. He elevated everything he was in.

Christina: My sweet spot of cinema history is '70s New Hollywood, and it's really interesting to compare and contrast him with Pacino, who has this dynamic, scrappy vitality, or Hoffman, who has a certain neuroticism. Hackman isn't doing any of those things. He's the quintessential, 'can disappear into any role' actor.

Jamie: He could be really abrasive, single-minded, obsessive, but at the same time he could bring such tenderness. Often he did a lot without doing anything, seemingly. For me, he's the GOAT.

Phil: He was abrasive, but there was real humanity beneath it. And he could be funny.

Chris: His chuckle is one of the great movie laughs. But he didn't break through until *Bonnie And Clyde* in 1967, when he was in his mid-thirties. And he goes on this incredible run in the early '70s.

Jamie: *Scarecrow* isn't mentioned as one of the great American films of the '70s, but it's just fantastic.

Phil: It's a really special film. There's an ambiguity between how self-serving the character is, and how much compassion and care he has for those around him.

Jamie: There's a scene in *Scarecrow* which sums up Hackman. He's in a diner getting into an argument with a guy, and on the spin of a dime he starts joking around and does a striptease, and he suddenly has everyone laughing along with him.

Chris: I basically have two Gene Hackman top tens. One from the head, one from the heart. *Scarecrow* is on the one from the head. Not sure about the heart. But it's a fantastic film.

Phil: Is *Runaway Jury* on both those lists?

Chris: It's number one on both. But a film we've probably all voted for is *The French Connection*. Amazing performance, amazing film.

Christina: There's not a bit of fat on the bones of this movie. And it's a really interesting new depiction of the street cop. The Popeye Doyle character is so unrepentantly unpleasant, there's something revolutionary about that.

Phil: It's a brilliant, high-velocity performance. I was torn between *French Connection* and *French Connection II*. It's a really good sequel.

Chris: It takes some bold swings. The cold-turkey sequence is great.

Phil: It's a phenomenal piece of acting. You see this character breaking down.

Jamie: I love the choices he'd make. There was something animalistic about Gene Hackman. He was a big, robust man. You always get the sense that when he's in a suit, he wants to rip it off and get out of it.



Christina: That's an incredible observation. He genuinely looks like someone you'd not want to tangle with.

Chris: He downplays that in *The Conversation* as Harry Caul, which is one of his most introverted performances. Where does *The Conversation* rank in our conversation?

Phil: Number one for me. There are so many great films in his filmography, but I don't remember a film that captures loneliness quite as powerfully as this.

Christina: I like seeing the more tamped-down, interior thing that he's doing in *The Conversation*. I like his quiet wrestling with himself.

Jamie: He's so controlled in it. He wears that plastic mac all the time, and he's got his knotted tie and his spectacles. He brings so much pain and Catholic guilt to it as it goes

on. It's an extraordinary performance, and quite unusual for Hackman.

Phil: And I love the spiritual sequel too, *Enemy Of The State...*

Chris: Me too. When Hackman turns up, it raises it up a level. But he's amazing in *The Conversation*. The Academy didn't agree. They didn't even nominate him. Idiots. And another one they should have nominated him for is *Night Moves*.

Christina: There was a lack of vanity, I think, with Hackman. He didn't need to play the in-charge, alpha male. He's willing to allow himself to be bereft. You see that a lot in his movies.

Jamie: It's such a bleak ending. *Night Moves* and *The French Connection* are two of the most bleak endings you'll see in a film.

Chris: There's a '70s film we haven't mentioned yet. He is



my Lex Luthor. He's incredible in *Superman*, and *Superman II* too. He's so much fun in both.

Jamie: The first *Superman* is a classic comic-book movie. I love the fun he has with it. Comedy came into his roles as he got older, but this is early evidence that he could do everything.

Chris: After *The French Connection*, he didn't get nominated again for an Oscar until 1988's *Mississippi Burning*.

Phil: I don't think it's right up there in the pantheon. And if you made it now, it would be a very different movie. But I love Gene Hackman in this film. He goes into a Klan meeting room, full of hostile people, and owns it in a minute-and-a-half.

Jamie: It allows Hackman to do those things he does so well.

Chris: He was happy to be a supporting player throughout his career. But he was also a leading man for four decades,

which is incredibly difficult to do. So you have things in the '90s like *Narrow Margin*, and then David Mamet's *Heist* in 2001. In the latter he's the subject of one of the great lines, when Ricky Jay says of him, "My motherfucker's so cool, when he goes to bed, sheep count him." Makes no sense, but describes Gene Hackman perfectly.

Jamie: 1995 was such a great year for Hackman. *Crimson Tide*, *Get Shorty*, *The Quick And The Dead*. How many actors of any age are pulling out a year like that?

Chris: What a trio of films. *Get Shorty* showcased his comedic side. He was capable of being very funny. If you go back to his incredible cameo in *Young Frankenstein*, he didn't just have the chuckle; he could provoke chuckles in other people.

Christina: I love him in *The*

Birdcage, where he's ostensibly playing the least funny part. He's so self-serious, as a Republican dad, that it's very funny.

Chris: *Crimson Tide* has featured pretty high on several Rankings already. It's just one of the best examples of two A-list actors — Denzel Washington being another candidate for greatest actor of all time — going toe-to-toe.

Jamie: The last 60 minutes of the movie is almost in real time. And you have these two powerhouse actors locking horns. It's an absolute joy.

Phil: It's magnetic, from start to finish. It's a blockbuster, but it's really just a little chamber piece. It's almost like a play.

Chris: He's one of the great

rage-exploders in cinema history. It's him and Michael Caine, who can go from zero to AAAAAAH in 3.2 seconds. But another film I adore is *The Quick And The Dead*. He's so eminently hissable in that film. But I recognise that most people don't think like me, and that most people will say that *Unforgiven* is probably the best Western he ever made, where he played Little Bill Daggett.

Christina: I do love *The Quick And The Dead*. I totally get it. It's like a B side. *Unforgiven* is the A side. It's such a cynical film that slowly deconstructs everything we think we understand about black hats and white hats of the Old West. **Chris:** I think it'll rank highly here. Merit's got something to do with it, after all.

Jamie: He turned down *Unforgiven* because he was worried it glorified gun violence. Clint Eastwood had to have a little word in his shell-like and convince him that wasn't the film he was making. Thank God he did.

Chris: He retired in the early 2000s on doctor's advice. His final film, *Welcome To Mooseport*, is fine. It's okay. But he made some bangers in the 2000s. I love *Heist*, and I have a huge soft spot for *Runaway Jury*. But his last great film might well be *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

Phil: I like it. I just don't love it as much as many do. He's great in it.

Christina: There's something really meaningful about this idea that Wes Anderson is playing with: the persona of Hackman as this old, rough and tough, macho guy. It's a really nice bookend.

Jamie: One of the enduring images I have of Hackman is him go-karting and jumping into a swimming pool. It's his last great performance.

Chris: Jesus Christ, man, have you not seen *Runaway Jury*?

Jamie: I take that back.

Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?

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THE TOP TEN

1



THE FRENCH CONNECTION
(1971)

2



THE CONVERSATION
(1974)

3



UNFORGIVEN
(1992)

4



CRIMSON TIDE
(1995)

5



NIGHT MOVES
(1975)

6



SUPERMAN
(1978)

7



SCARECROW
(1973)

8



MISSISSIPPI BURNING
(1988)

9



THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS
(2001)

10



ENEMY OF THE STATE
(1998)



SPOILER SPECIAL

Wolf Man

**DIRECTOR LEIGH WHANNELL
ON THE KEY MOMENTS FROM
HIS FURRY FRIGHTENER**

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

LEIGH WHANNELL'S *WOLF MAN* may not have had the same box-office heat as his previous reimagining of a beloved Universal Monster, 2020's *The Invisible Man*, but it's a similarly bold take, dispensing with many of the tropes of the werewolf movie (silver bullets, full moon, a sudden transformation) to tell the tragic story of a family man (Christopher Abbott's Blake) who is slowly infected with a lycanthropic disease over the course of a single night, much to the horror of his wife Charlotte (Julia Garner) and daughter Ginger (Matilda Firth). "I knew going in, there's probably a certain contingent of people that are going to be like, 'This isn't how a werewolf movie works!'" Whannell tells *Empire*. "But I felt it was important to do my version of it." Here, he talks us through the main beats.

THE COLD OPENING

So cold, in fact, that we can see breath on the air. Which is important in this opening sequence, introducing us to young Blake (Zac Chandler) and his father, Grady (Sam Jaeger), as they go on a hunting trip, and end up in a deer blind, possibly being stalked by an unseen wolf man. Unseen, that is, except for the creature's breath, which appears just behind Grady's head. "I did something similar in *The Invisible Man*," he admits. "With this film, the idea to use breath

just organically comes out of, 'What is a sign that there's something there?' We weren't hanging the whole movie on that concept!"

A SUDDEN CRASH

Whannell loves to lull characters, and audiences, into a false sense of security. On a drive into the Oregon woods to move into the home of Grady, who's been legally declared dead after going missing, Blake is startled by the appearance of a figure in the road, causing him to veer his van into a tree, setting the scene for a vertiginous set-piece in which he and his family are attacked by a wolf man. "I love having a scene that plunges you off a cliff," says Whannell. "When I was writing it, it was fun. Then, when I got into pre-production, the director-me was mad at the writer-me for such a logistically difficult scene to do."

SCARS

Pursued by the lupine beast into Grady's home, Blake and family hole up for the night. Blake tries to reassure Ginger that they're safe and, in doing so, states Whannell's central thesis for the film: "Sometimes, when you're a daddy, you're so scared of your kids getting scars that you become the thing that scars them." "I was a parent during Covid, when I was writing," he says. "Everything I was feeling, I was putting in the script. I was



struggling with parenting and all the guilt you feel as a parent. I wanted to talk about the cycle of parenting, and how we fuck up our kids.”

SPIDER MAN

Soon, it's revealed that Blake was actually wounded by the wolf man during that treetop attack, and has been infected by something that's slowly but surely transforming him too. There are various stages of the infection, during which we see how Blake's senses and perception of the world is changing. Whannell's personal favourite: the moment when Blake hears something stomping around upstairs. When he investigates, it turns out to be nothing more than a spider, sound magnified by his new wolfish hearing. “It's the moment when everything shifts on its axis,” says Whannell. “It was fun to sound-design it. We had fun breaking the rules — we'll put the sound over in one corner of the theatre, just because. It's a very sound-design-driven film.”

FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

As the disease takes hold of Blake, we shift POVs between him and Charlotte, and quickly realise that his ability to communicate is slipping away. In one scene, we become aware that neither of them can understand a word the other is saying. “What made me excited about making this film

was the image of a husband and a wife standing in front of each other, and the wife is talking, and it's just gibberish,” says Whannell, who, in a field day for amateur psychoanalysts, wrote the movie with his wife, Corbett Tuck. “I got excited. ‘I can make a movie about people who can no longer talk.’ It's a great metaphor for communication problems in a marriage.”

DADDY'S HOME

That scars speech wasn't just metaphorical. For it turns out that the creature who's been stomping around outside the house all night is Blake's old (wolf) man, Grady. And so the stage is set for a wolf-*mano* versus wolf-*mano* fight in the kitchen. “This is not Jet Li versus Jackie Chan,” says Whannell of staging the scene. “I said to the stunt team, ‘Try to imagine two dogs fighting and ripping at each other.’ We tried our best to get it to this animalistic place.” Mission accomplished, as Blake sinks his teeth into Grady's throat.

BLAKE'S GOT A NEW FACE

Immediately after that, Blake assumes his final form, skin popping and pulsing, nails replaced by claws, jaw being violently dislocated. A clip of this was released just before *Wolf Man* opened, leading many to believe it was the film's big transformation moment. “It's a culmination,” says Whannell. “I

wanted this to be a slower transformation, happening throughout the movie. That degradation really does mirror how a disease works.” Comparisons are always there to be drawn between any such scene and Rick Baker's iconic work in *An American Werewolf In London*. “I'm not going to try to one-up Rick Baker,” laughs Whannell. “I'm going to take a different approach.”

FAREWELL, BLAKE

The movie reaches its conclusion back in that deer blind (“It's a mirror image,” says Whannell. “I love symmetry in movies”) as Blake, now fully transformed, tracks Charlotte and Ginger. Rather than ripping them limb from limb, though, he stares at his family, almost begging Charlotte to shoot him. “He wants it to be over,” says Ginger. And sure enough, it soon is. “I was basically designing a tragedy,” says Whannell of Blake's sad but dignified death, something he was inspired to write after watching a friend suffer with, and sadly succumb to, a degenerative disease. “With *Wolf Man*, pretty much everyone in the world has had some experience with disease. I was speaking to that experience of losing a parent or a loved one or a close friend.”

WOLF MAN IS OUT NOW ON DIGITAL AND ON 21 APRIL
ON DVD AND BLU-RAY

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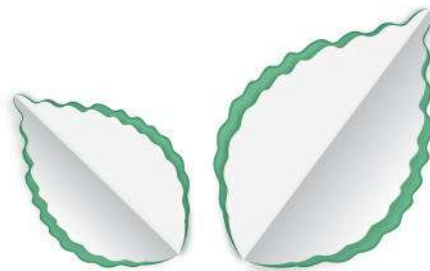
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THIS MONTH

TIPTOES

UNLESS YOU'VE SEEN *Tiptoes* (2002), it sounds like a made-up movie — like the films the Robert Downey Jr character from *Tropic Thunder* is supposed to have starred in. It's the one where Matthew McConaughey and Gary Oldman play twin brothers Steven and Rolfe Bedalia — the latter of whom is a dwarf.

Um, yes, well... there's the problem.

On the one hand, the illusion is remarkably good — far better than José Ferrer with shoes on his knees as Toulouse-Lautrec in John Huston's *Moulin Rouge* and less jarring than the CG trickery used to create pint-sized Hugh Jackman for a joke in *Deadpool And Wolverine*. Oldman, always up for an acting challenge, gives a warm, sensitive performance which rates among his best work. But, even in 2002, the film was criticised for not starring an actual little person. The obvious suggestion would be to hire Peter Dinklage — which is kind of patronising since a) Rolfe isn't a Peter Dinklage-type role and b) Peter Dinklage is in the film in a 100 per cent Peter Dinklage-type role as an arrogant, studly French dwarf who constantly bristles with indignation (and shacks up with Patricia Arquette).

The hook is that Carol (Kate Beckinsale — also on great form) has an unplanned pregnancy, then learns her boyfriend (McConaughey) is the only average-sized person in a family of little people and that their baby will probably be a dwarf. It's a liberal, issues-conscious film as Carol overcomes her initial shock — and learns not to

TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC
KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS
UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER



Top to bottom: Patricia Arquette and Peter Dinklage; Oh, baby: Gary Oldman and Kate Beckinsale.

call little people "midgets" — then commits to the baby, even as her conflicted husband can't handle it. Carol eventually seems to transfer her affections to the nicer, shorter brother in a genuinely sweet, weird romance. But the film can't help but invite comparisons with such dwarf-centric cult items as the weird Western *The Terror Of Tiny Town*, Werner Herzog's *Even Dwarfs Started Small* or the inexplicable Chevy Chase vehicle *Under The Rainbow*. Oldman plays scenes with Michael J. Anderson of *Twin Peaks* as a barbeque-proud patriarch and his on-off girlfriend is played by Bridget Powerz (who also worked in adult films under the alias 'Bridget The Midget'). The film never — ahem — looks down on its characters and is frank about the health problems attendant on the condition ("little-people shit", Rolfe says as he self-medicates joint pain).

Writer-director Matthew Bright made the highly recommended cult oddities *Freeway* (Reese Witherspoon and Kiefer Sutherland in a trashy, modernised *Red Riding Hood*) and *Freeway 2: Confessions Of A Trickbaby* (Natasha Lyonne and Vincent Gallo do *Hansel And Gretel*). He turned in a 150-minute director's cut of *Tiptoes*, which was savaged to 90 minutes for release... and hasn't made a film since. Kate Beckinsale agreed to do the film for far less than her usual fee on the condition she be allowed to wear her lucky hat — then the producers took exception to the hat and tried to cut it out of the film (which is enough to turn us against them). What remains of the film is saddled with an inapt music score and awkward segues from comedy to soap — but there's enough good-to-great material to suggest that a proper *Tiptoes* restoration would be a worthwhile endeavour.

CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

DIRTY ANGELS

(DIGITAL)

ISIS baddies kidnap schoolgirls in Afghanistan. Badasses Maria Bakalova, Ruby Rose etc shoot their way out of tight spots to rescue them. Martin Campbell's direction is heavy on detonating bombs under stuntmen. Eva Green is a surprisingly acceptable Chuck Norris substitute.

THE MOUSE TRAP

(DIGITAL)

Another justoutofcopyrightsploitation slasher, this has a haunted print of the 1928 Disney cartoon *Steamboat Willie* possess writer-producer-schlump Simon Phillips, who puts on a Mickey Mouse mask and slaughters a group at a party in a Canadian fun palace. Being legal doesn't mean it's mandatory.

NEW RELIGION

(DVD, BLU-RAY)

Traumatized Miyabi (Kaho Seto) is hired by Oka (Satoshi Oka), who photographs segments of her body in a form of collage — a process designed to trigger a cosmic event. An oblique, understated exercise in visionary horror, this marks writer-director Keishi Kondo as a major talent.

ODDITY

(DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL)

Blind psychic Darcy visits the house where her twin sister was murdered with a gift — a lifesize mannequin — for her brother-in-law and his partner. Carolyn Bracken is terrific in a dual role, while director-writer Damian McCarthy (*Caveat*) conjures an atmosphere of dread in this quiet, eerie, ghostly mystery.

STOCKHOLM BLOODBATH

(DIGITAL)

A three-day binge of executions in 1520 gets Guy Ritchie-ish treatment in this mix of historical camp and revenge drama. Sophie Cookson and Alba August hunt a maniac, and Jakob Oftebro steals the show as a wicked archbishop.



STORY OF THE SHOT

It Happened One Night

HOW THE WALLS OF JERICHO WERE CONSTRUCTED

WORDS IAN FREER

THE ORIGIN

The first film to win the Big Five Oscars (Best Picture, Director, Actor, Actress, Screenplay), Frank Capra's 1934 belter *It Happened One Night* follows unemployed journo Peter Warne (Clark Gable) and runaway heiress Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) on a bus-and-hitchhiking trip from Miami to Noo Yawk. Holing up on the road overnight, the key moment, a publicity photo for which is seen above, sees Warne hang a blanket over a clothesline ("Behold the walls of Jericho!") to maintain propriety — what follows is funny, endearing, and cheekier than the cheekiest Nando's. The idea is in the source material, Samuel Hopkins Adams' short story *Night Bus*, but in the hands of Capra, screenwriter Robert Riskin and the sparkling actors, it is romcom gold.

"I think one of the reasons why the scene has lasted through the years is there's a level of intimacy involved which is stunning," says Billy Mernit, author of *Writing The Romantic Comedy*. "In its day, the idea of them sharing this motel room was considered extremely risqué. It would be the equivalent of having a threesome in a romcom now." The *Challengers* of its day.

THE SHOOT

The scene was captured at Columbia/Gower studios in late 1933. Shot pre the Hays Code, the scene survived cuts in the increasingly prohibitive atmosphere thanks to pure good taste. "It's titillating, yet it's not sleazy or weird," says Mernit. "If it had been handled badly, it could have been one creepy scene. But as it's done, it is very sophisticated. They both have good lines and are very much equals in it." The image of a makeshift wall also provides a metaphor. "The root of their distrust is this class difference," says Joseph McBride, film historian and author of *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe Of Success*. "I think what appealed to the audience so much about this film was it kind of levelled the barriers between classes during the Depression. They're all in it together."

In one colourful on-set moment, Gable and Capra told Colbert there was a problem with the scene so the actor would poke her head around the curtain. "Gable lay on his back under the covers, smirking, with a large bulge rising from between his legs — he had taken a prop potato masher and propped it under the blanket," says McBride. "Awwwww, you guys!" Colbert

Icon Film Distribution, Imago

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

ADAM LEVINE

DAY OF THE FIGHT DIRECTOR JACK HUSTON ON
PAVING THE WAY TO JOE PESCI

JOE PESCI HAS appeared in just two movies in the last few years. There's *The Irishman*, of course, for which we have to thank Martin Scorsese. And there's Jack Huston's directorial debut *Day Of The Fight*, in which Pesci makes a memorable and mute cameo as a man struggling with dementia. And for that we have to thank, of all people, Adam Levine. Yes, the guy from Maroon 5. What gives, Jack Huston? "My wife's very close with his wife, and we went over to his house," Huston tells *Empire*. "And he gave me some earphones and said, 'I'll give you \$100 if you can tell me who's singing.'"

Levine's cash stayed safely in his wallet. Because the singer was Pesci, who had been a lounge singer before becoming an actor, and who had just collaborated with Levine on an album called *Still Singing*, the follow-up to an album Pesci released in the 1960s called *Little Joe Sure Can Sing!*. And he sure can, when he's not busy terrorising gangsters or trying to break into Macaulay Culkin's house. The revelation that Pesci could sing blew Huston's mind, and led to him approaching the actor to appear in the film.

"That night, I came up with the idea of him as the father," he says, referring to the scene in *Day Of The Fight* where Michael C. Pitt's boxer, Mikey, visits his dad in a care home.

Ravaged by dementia, the father can't say a word, only coming alive when Mikey plays him a song that he recorded. That song was Pesci's 'If I Ever Lost You'. "I wanted Joe to record something new, but then I came across 'If I Ever Lost You', and it was everything," he says. So Levine's place in the Special Thanks section is well-deserved. "It was a truly lifechanging moment," muses Huston. "I wouldn't have heard Joe Pesci sing if it wasn't for him." **CHRIS HEWITT**

DAY OF THE FIGHT IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY
AND DIGITALINSTANT
TRIVIA

1

The 'Walls Of Jericho' comment refers to the story in the biblical book of Joshua about the fall of Jericho at the hands of the Israelites, the walls brought down by seven priests blowing horns.

2

The moment where Ellie drapes her undies over the 'wall' was born out of Claudette Colbert's refusal to get undressed before the camera.

3

It's an oft-reported fact that sales of vests plummeted after Clark Gable took off his shirt to reveal a bare chest, but there are no hard figures to support this.

4

Much to Capra's chagrin, *It Happened One Night* was one of Adolf Hitler's favourite films, the dictator being somewhat obsessed with Gable (the feeling wasn't mutual). "I resent it like the Devil," Capra said in 1941.

Main: Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable push the boundary.
Right: Rocker Adam Levine.

laughed." Intimacy co-ordinators: clearly not a thing in 1933.

THE LEGACY

Sweeping the Oscars, the film's triumph significantly impacted its director. "The success of this film helped lead to Capra's downfall," says McBride. "He felt this terrible pressure to consistently prove he was the best — that's a horrible pressure to have."

Still, the scene went on to be incredibly influential, 'borrowed' by everything from *M*A*S*H* to *Hi-De-Hi*. "There might have been moments in other movies where people were thrown together in an overnight situation, but here they really made a meal of it," says Mernit. "People don't even realise now they are imitating it. It's just a trope that has become part of the form." Expect the Glen Powell-Sydney Sweeney version any day now. **IAN FREER**

IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY
AND DIGITAL

Losing their religion

HERETIC DIRECTORS

SCOTT BECK AND BRYAN WOODS ON CRAFTING THEIR CONTROVERSIAL HORROR

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

WHEN SCOTT BECK and Bryan Woods — the writing/directing duo known simply as Beck/Woods — wrote their new movie, the excellent thriller *Heretic*, they knew that it was likely to piss off a whole lot of people. Because, as the title suggests, it was a film tackling the very concept of religion, as two young Mormon missionaries (Sophie Thatcher and Chloe East) find themselves challenged, philosophically and physically, by a man called Mr. Reed (Hugh Grant), a sinister scholar who claims to have found the One True Religion. And when you tackle religion, you run the risk of offending somebody. But even they didn't think they would annoy John Landis.

"Less than 48 hours ago, we were lucky enough to sneak into the Masters Of Horror dinner that Mick Garri hosts every year," says Woods. "John Landis came to our table and was roasting us about the last 15 minutes of the movie. He was unloading on us, and there was part of us that was like, 'Wow, this is really surreal.' And part of us was like, 'This is so great.' We really wanted to make something people will talk about and have a fierce take on what the final 15 means to them."

Beck and Woods — who wrote *A Quiet Place* — are happy to drill down into virtually every aspect of *Heretic* except what that final 15 minutes, and specifically the final five, truly means. We won't give specifics here, but let's just say it involves the odd stabbing, the expression of some heretical notions, death, an apparent resurrection and, maybe, just maybe, a reincarnation. But whatever your take on the ending, Beck and Woods are glad if you engaged. "We're still not wanting to share our personal viewpoint, because that's not the point of the movie," says Beck, who admits to having received "not quite a death threat email but a, 'Heathens, how dare you!'" within the last 24 hours. "There have been people, both religious and non-religious, that have seen something that meant a lot to them in the movie. And, simultaneously, people from both sides who felt almost offended by it in some sorts [of ways]."

Heretic has been bubbling over on the Beck/

Woods stove for around a decade. That's when the duo, who have been friends since childhood, first sat down to write it. "Some writers want to grow up and make their Batman movie, or their *Star Wars* movie," says Woods. "We wanted to make our religion movie."

They got as far as the first 15 pages before realising they needed to do some research in order to best express Mr. Reed's interesting views on organised religion. Scratch that, a lot of research. But they didn't feel truly ready to write it and make it until Woods' father passed away during post-production on their previous movie as directors, 65. "All of a sudden you're asking yourself those questions that Scott and I have been asking ourselves since we were kids, but it's more real," he says. "What happens when you die? What is the meaning of life? What's the point of what we're doing here? It felt like, 'Now is the time.' We are emotional, we're feeling it."

Heretic's best scene sees Mr. Reed explain his theories about how organised religion has been repackaged through centuries of different iterations, with the help of some editions of Monopoly (including a Bob Ross version).

"Monopoly is a great metaphor because of its history with Elizabeth Magie (*the woman who effectively invented Monopoly as The Landlord's Game, only to see the credit, acclaim, and profits go elsewhere*), and the undertones of feminism and control," says Woods. "That relationship it had to religion felt interesting to us."

"John Landis roasted us about the last 15 minutes."

BRYAN WOODS





The focus on repackaging ideas [or, as Mr. Reed puts it, iterating] was something on Beck and Woods' minds as they made *Heretic*. Not least because they took pains to make sure that their movie couldn't be dismissed as a watered-down version of the movies that gave them inspiration. "The good news for us is the influences were all over the map," laughs Beck. "David Mamet's *Oleanna*, Polanski's *Death And The Maiden*, Stanley Kramer's *Inherit The Wind*. Those are all talky conversation pieces. We also wanted to blend in a bit of genre to it."

Few people, if any, would join the dots between those movies and *Heretic*. But one surefire way to also set it apart from what has come before is to write an all-timer of a villain, which they duly provided with Mr. Reed. Grant, whose second act as an actor is about as interesting as any you can think of, is on stunning, BAFTA-nominated form as a man whose warm, avuncular front gradually reveals a more domineering, downright dangerous centre. He's by turns charming, unsettling, funny, and terrifying. He also has roughly 90 per cent of the movie's dialogue. "We had seen Mr. Reed as this kind of Midwest, Middle America voice," says Woods. "When we first had the idea of Hugh, it wasn't obvious to us. But the inspiration for the character were people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, and how is that voice not in the character of Mr. Reed, that kind of quintessential English intellectual? We talked some sense into ourselves."

Heretic came out in the US and the UK last November, just after Halloween had passed (Mr. Reed might have some interesting things to say about that). So, it won't be until this year that Beck and Woods can truly judge the impact of their movie, and their creation. If, this 31 October, they see a bunch of Mr. Reeds out in the wild — all wide-rimmed glasses, chequered cardigan, welcoming grin, perhaps clutching a copy of the Bob Ross Monopoly — they'll know they've cooked up an enduring horror icon. "That would be a dream," laughs Beck. "That would be a dream." Maybe they can dress up as Mr. Reed and go to John Landis' house. Could be one hell of an experience.

HERETIC IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL



Clockwise from main:
Game on: Mr. Reed (Hugh Grant) welcomes Sister Paxton (Chloe East) and Sister Barnes (Sophie Thatcher); Seeing the light; Time for the sermon; The plot thickens; Writer-directors Scott Beck and Bryan Woods with East.



The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST
YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE.
ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

PETER JACKSON



1 In his directorial debut, *Bad Taste*, Jackson plays two roles (and, in fact, attacks himself at one point) — the alien, Robert, and who else?

2 The poster star of Jackson's gloriously gonzo puppet comedy *Meet The Feebles* is a homicidal hippo with a machine gun. What is that hippo called?

3 Jackson's third movie — the insanely gory zombie flick *Braindead* — is known by what other title?

4 Which actor was originally cast in the Mark Wahlberg role in Jackson's adaptation of *The Lovely Bones*?

5 What is the name of the insane FBI agent in *The Frighteners*, who utters the line, "Sheriff Perry, you are violating my territorial bubble!"?



6 Name the fictional kingdom that Juliet Hulme (Kate Winslet) and Pauline Parker (Melanie Lynskey) create in *Heavenly Creatures*.

7 Name the two women (one of whom is Jackson's wife) with whom Jackson has co-written each of his movies since *The Fellowship Of The Ring*.

8 Andy Serkis plays the title character in *King Kong*, of course. But he also plays another character. What is their name?

9 Jackson's epic Beatles documentary *Get Back* chronicles the making of which album?

10 Jackson cameos as a drunken man eating a carrot in *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, and a corsair on the Black Ships in *The Return Of The King*. Who does he play in *The Two Towers*?

11 Name all 13 Dwarves who team up with Bilbo in the *Hobbit* trilogy. Bonus point for naming the actors.



12 What is the last line of *The Lord Of The Rings: The Fellowship Of The Ring*?

13 In which film does Jackson stab Simon Pegg through the hand, while dressed as Father Christmas?

14 World War I biplanes owned by Jackson, presumably stored in a crowded house, can be heard on a song called 'Divebomber', by which lauded New Zealand singer-songwriter?

15 What is the name of Jackson's production company?

16 Which TV host cameos as Laketown Spy in *The Hobbit: The Desolation Of Smaug*?

17 What is the highest-grossing movie of Jackson's career, with a worldwide gross of \$1.138 billion?

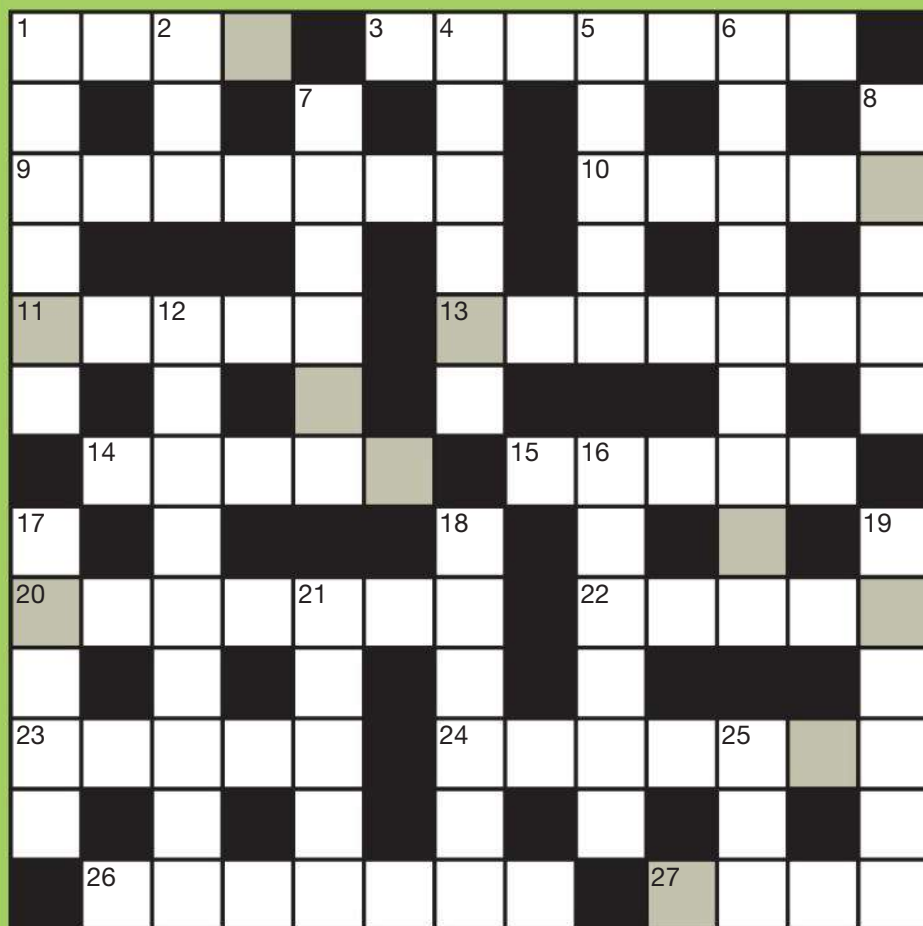
18 What is the name of Jackson's acclaimed 2018 documentary about World War I, which used footage shot during that war?

19 And what is the name of Jackson's fake documentary about a fictional Kiwi filmmaker called Colin McKenzie?

20 He has produced four movies that were nominated for the Best Picture Oscar. Three of those are the Lord Of The Rings trilogy. No points for that. But what was the fourth?

ANSWERS 1 Derek 2 Heidi 3 *Dead Alive* 4 Ryan Gosling 5 *Million Dammars* (Jeffrey Combs) 6 Borovnia 7 Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens 8 Lumpy — the cook 9 *Let It Be* 10 A Rohirrim warrior 11 Balin (Ken Stott), Bifur (William Kirchner), Bombur (James Nesbitt), Bombur (Stephen Hunter), Dori (Mark Hadlow), Dwain (Graham McTavish), Fili (Dean O'Gorman), Glóin (Peter Hambleton), Killi (Aidan Turner), Nori (Jed Brophy), Ori (John Callen), Ori (Adam Brown), Thorin Oakenshield (Richard Armitage) 12 "Sam, I'm glad you're with me." 13 *Hot Fuzz* 14 Neil Finn 15 *WingNut Films* 16 Stephen Colbert 17 *The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King* 18 *They Shall Not Grow Old* 19 *Forgotten Silver* 20 *District 9*

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 "Not the —!" cries Nicolas Cage (4)
 3 His name's Kitano, or 'Beat' (7)
 9 Little Miss Sunshine's Greg (7)
 10 Vaughn, who played Norman Bates in Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* remake (5)
 11 It links the Alliance, a moon and the *Pitch Perfect* movies (5)
 13 Could be Keri, could be Kurt (7)
 14 Steve Coogan satire about a billionaire fashion-store boss (5)
 15 Aka Ava Starr (5)
 20 Police robot voiced by Sharlto Copley (7)
 22 Marshall, the filmmaker behind *A League Of Their Own* and *Big* (5)
 23 Rosa Salazar's Battle Angel (5)
 24 See 7 Down
 26 Johnny, who struck again (7)
 27 Inventive actress Lamarr (4)

DOWN

- 1 They feature in *Easy Rider*, *The Wild One* and *Wild Hogs* (6)
 2 Production company founded by Harry Saltzman and Cubby Broccoli (3)
 4 Princess from *Sleeping Beauty* (6)
 5 Butler and Hanks led this biopic (5)
 6 Shirley, who's in 14 Across and the Bridget Jones series (9)
 7/24 Across Surely, he's in *Airplane!* (6,7)
 8 20 Across' director Blomkamp (5)
 12 Horror flick from *Companion's* producer (9)
 16 See 18 Down
 17 Adam, who made *The Big Short* (5)
 18/16 He starred as Frank Booth (6,6)
 19 First name shared by Greenstreet and Sweeney (6)
 21 The prequel to *X* (5)
 25 — *Said* (Carey Mulligan film) (3)

COMPETITION

WIN!

EPIC MOVIES
ON 4K UHD

SPRING, IT SEEMS, is here, and what better time to brighten up your 4K Ultra HD collection? This issue three winners can nab three titles on 4K UHD from the new Epic Movies promotion. Packed with epic action and jaw-dropping visuals in movies ranging from *Marvel Studios' Deadpool & Wolverine* to *Alien: Romulus*, featured titles are available on 4K, Blu-ray or DVD. First in our prize bundle is über-hit *Avatar: The Way Of Water* — it had a tough act to follow, but boy, did it succeed. Next, James Cameron again — *Aliens*, the stunning sci-fi sequel. And finally, *Kingdom Of The Planet Of The Apes*, continuing the ever-popular simian saga. To enter, crack the crossword, solve the anagram, and follow the instructions below.

THE EPIC MOVIES COLLECTION IS AVAILABLE AT
 AMAZON AND HMV

COMPETITION ENDS 5 MAY

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 5 May. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

MAY'S ANSWERS ACROSS 1 Red State, 5 Hand, 9 Barry, 10 Tribeca, 11 Nick, 12 Anjelica, 14 Arthur, 15 McGann, 17 Levinson, 18 Ship, 21 Wedding, 22 Agnes, 23 Shot, 24 Redmayne. **DOWN** 1 Robin, 2 Direct-to-video, 3 Toys, 4 Titane, 6 American Honey, 7 Diana, 8 Silence, 13 Quentin, 16 Boogie, 17 Lewis, 19 Posse, 20 Calm. **ANAGRAM** DAVID HARBOUR

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 6 May or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. Three winners will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winners is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winners will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winners a maximum of three times. If a winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: <http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/>. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see <http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html>



CLASSIC SCENE

THE TRICK CONFESSION

A Simple Plan

CHOSEN BY **SETH GORDON**
(DIRECTOR)

Seth Gordon: "There's a scene in *A Simple Plan* where you think Billy Bob Thornton's character is on one person's team, but it becomes clear he's actually on the other person's team. And the whole movie turns on that. It's just a tour de force from everyone involved. It's a wonderful thing, if you can take the tension."

LOU'S LIVING ROOM — NIGHT

After finding a crashed plane carrying \$4 million in cash, things have spiralled out of control for Hank (Bill Paxton) and his brother Jacob (Billy Bob Thornton). With blood on their hands, they've gone to the house of fellow plane-finder Lou (Brent Briscoe), with a simple plan: to trick him into pretending that he's Hank, confessing to the murder of a local farmer, while they record it...

LOU: Okay here, I'm coming in. Ready? (He knocks on the wall)

JACOB: Okay. Hello?

LOU: (Entering the room) Carl... it's Hank Mitchell.

JACOB: Well, hey, Hank, how you doing? Sit down.

LOU: Hey, how you doing?

Hank furtively turns on the hidden tape recorder.

LOU: I need to talk to ya.

JACOB: Yeah, okay. What about?

LOU: It's about Dwight Stephanson.

JACOB: Yeah?

LOU: He didn't die in an accident.

JACOB: What are you talking about?

LOU: No, no, I killed him.

JACOB: You killed Dwight Stephanson?

LOU: That's right. I suffocated him with his own scarf and then I just shoved him off the bridge into Anders Creek. I made it look like an accident.

JACOB: Well, why would you do something like that?

HANK: That's okay, that's okay, that's enough. We got it, we got it.

LOU: Well, four-and-a-half-million dollars is worth a hell of a lot more to me than some old man's life.

HANK: That's enough, that's enough.

LOU: No, I'm up to the part where you're gonna agree to testify against us. Okay, can I just do that? Come on!

Hank reveals his recorder. Plays Lou's 'confession'.

LOU: You taped this?

HANK: Yeah.

Jacob looks down at the floor, guilt-stricken.

LOU: Why, why would you do that, Hank?

HANK: It's your confession. It's you saying how you killed Dwight Stephanson.

LOU: Ain't nobody's gonna believe that. I mean, I mean it's obvious I'm just kidding around on there. Isn't it, Jake?

HANK: Why would anybody believe it? I mean, let's just think about this. If you and I both go into Carl's office tomorrow afternoon and we both claim the other one killed Dwight Stephanson, who do you think he's gonna believe, huh? You? A 40-year-old, unemployed high-school dropout who's proud when people call him the town drunk? Or me? I've got a job. I don't get drunk and scream obscenities at my wife in public. I don't pass out in other people's doorways. I wonder who he's gonna believe? Yeah. Now we're all back in the same boat again. Ain't that right, Jacob?

Lou looks at Jacob, betrayal dawning on his face.

HANK: You seem to have forgotten that we're all in this together.

JACOB: That's all it is, Lou.

HANK: That's all it is. Just a little insurance policy.

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